Exploring and challenging *perfectionism* in four high-achieving UK secondary schools.

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature……

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mum, an incredible role model. Also to Dad for supporting me throughout my education and Mark for keeping my spirits up with Leo videos on my thesis journey. I also dedicate it to my ‘Southern family’; particularly Pussa and Shelagh Skarbek for their warm encouragement along the way, my ‘fellow oddball’ Stewart for helping me think outside the box, and my tirelessly supportive partner, Sophie, for balancing her pride and frustration with this work so admirably and providing me the secure base from which to develop. Finally to Archie and Humphrey who have done more than they will ever know to keep me on track.

The research would not have been possible without the participation of the four schools and professionals; I am immensely grateful for your supportive involvement in the study; it was an honour and a pleasure to work with you all and you have thoroughly inspired me to pursue this research. This thesis is ultimately dedicated to each of you.

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Abstract

Perfectionism research is relatively sparse, particularly relating to UK secondary school students. International literature links *perfectionism* with both positive and negative outcomes in adulthood, including achievement and mental health difficulties. The aims of this study were both exploratory and theoretical; to explore the perspectives of students, teachers and parents in authorities in the South-West and North-West of England regarding the construct of *perfectionism,* to contribute to the knowledge on *perfectionism* in education (Phase One), and to investigate the role of schools and the educational psychologist (EP) in supporting students high in *perfectionism* through collaboration with students, parents, teachers, external professionals, EPs and the use of psychological theory to develop 'best-practice' guidance for schools and families (Phase Two).

Semi-structured interviews using personal construct psychology and projective techniques were carried out with 32 participants. Of these, 17 were students, 6 teachers and 9 parents from a boys' independent grammar school, girls' local authority grammar school, 'outstanding' (Ofsted) comprehensive school and 'outstanding' (Ofsted) academy. Analysis of the interviews revealed significant gaps in participant knowledge regarding *perfectionism* (as based on the existing literature), particularly relating to its possible function and associated risks. Participants also held beliefs which are likely to contribute to the reinforcement of *perfectionism* in students.

A summary of the raw data was shared with a range of health and education professionals, and guidance was planned based on 1) preferences and need identified by students, staff and parents; 2) practical application identified through discussions with professionals and examining the existing literature; and 3) psychological theory. A range of materials were produced and disseminated to participants for feedback. Evaluations were positive, suggesting a previously unexplored area of need in UK secondary schools and a role for the EP. There is also the potential for future work extending the research, to provide effective support to other settings and further contribute to the *perfectionism* literature.

Implications for educational psychology include recognition of a previously unidentified vulnerable group of students, an area for staff training and family support, and also therapeutic intervention. This is relevant for the current move towards traded services with EPs offering a wide range of services to schools, and also the introduction of the ‘social, emotional and mental health’ category of need following the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) reforms (DfE, 2014).

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Abbreviations

ACT	Acceptance and commitment therapy
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
AMPS	The Adaptive/Maladaptive *Perfectionism* Scale for Children
APS-R	The Almost Perfect Scale – Revised
ASC	Autism spectrum condition
BPD	Borderline personality disorder
BPS	British Psychological Society
CAMHS	Child and adolescent mental health service
CAPS	The Child and Adolescent *Perfectionism* Scale
CBT	Cognitive behavioural therapy
CPD	Continuing professional development
DBT	Dialectical behaviour therapy
ELSA	Emotional literacy support assistant
EP	Educational psychologist
EPS	Educational psychology service
FDTL	Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning
FMPS	The Frost Multidimensional *Perfectionism* Scale
GAD	Generalised anxiety disorder
HE	Higher education
IAPT	Improving Access to Psychological Therapies
INSET	In-service training
ITT	Initial teacher training
MBCT	Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy

MDT	Multi-disciplinary team
MMT	Multimodal therapy
NHS	National Health Service
OCD	Obsessive-compulsive disorder
OCPD	Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
OOP	Other-oriented *perfectionism*
PAR	Participatory action research
PCI	The *Perfectionism* Cognitions Inventory
PCP	Personal construct psychology
PI	*Perfectionism* Inventory
PQ	*Perfectionism* Questionnaire
PSPS-J	The *Perfectionistic* Self-Presentation Scale – Junior
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SEAL	Social and emotional aspects of learning
SEMH	Social, emotional and mental health
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SOP	Self-oriented *perfectionism*
SPP	Socially-prescribed *perfectionism*
STORM	(Suicide prevention and self-harm mitigation programme/training)
TEP	Trainee educational psychologist
THRIVE	(School-based emotional literacy intervention/approach)

1 Introduction

Perfectionism may be considered as the determined pursuit of unreasonably high standards, holding unrealistic expectations for oneself, others or both. Although this may appear to lead to various gains and achievement, it may also result in poor mental health due to its relentless and unsatisfying nature. The words ‘may be’ are used here intentionally because this definition reflects *my* understanding and interpretation of *perfectionism*. This is key to the current research, because it is clear from examining the literature that there is no definitive agreement about what *perfectionism* is. The word is therefore in italics throughout to highlight debate over its meaning rather than assuming discussion of an agreed-upon term. A broad range of constructs are represented in the literature, with the only agreement being *perfectionism*’s multidimensionality (Hewitt and Flett, 1991), explored later. The interpretation of the word *perfectionism* presented here is undoubtedly based on my personal attitudes, values and beliefs, influenced by experiences and significant others. I approach the research from a humanist viewpoint, strongly influenced by aspects of eco-systemic and psychodynamic theories.

This first point is pertinent, as this thesis takes as its basis the notion that there is no consensus on what *perfectionism* is, hence it is likely to be interpreted differently by individuals based on their unique values and experiences. Attitudes about *perfectionism* are likely to influence behaviours towards students high in *perfectionism*, serving to either challenge or maintain beliefs and therefore behaviour. This has significance for education if *perfectionism* links with both achievement and poor mental health, as in my understanding from the existing

literature. What follows is a discussion of the rationale for this piece of work, based on: the current state of knowledge; the educational, political and psychological climate; and my personal and professional journey to the research topic. This concludes with a summary of the research problem and related research questions.

1.1 The state of knowledge prior to this research

Limited but growing. The *perfectionism* literature is limited, particularly when compared with other 'isms' in personality psychology, for example neuroticism or optimism. The literature on *perfectionism* in school students restricts the field further. Specifically, the current state of knowledge on *perfectionism* in UK school students is incredibly sparse, limited at the time of writing to a small sample of studies, focused on sporting rather than academic achievement. For example, *perfectionism* in junior-elite male athletes aged 11-18 (Appleton, Hall and Hill, 2009; 2010), *perfectionism* and disordered eating in 'young talented dancers' between 10-18 years, attending advanced training centres (Nordin-Bates, Walker and Redding, 2011), and a recent study exploring the basic psychological needs associated with *perfectionism* in sport amongst male and female youth athletes with a mean age of 16 (Jowett, Hill, Hall and Curran, 2016). A Scottish study explored the role of *perfectionism* in adolescent depression, anxiety and self-harm (O'Connor, Rasmussen and Hawton, 2010) suggesting an area for significant further research. However, the remaining UK-based *perfectionism* in education research targets higher education (HE) students (e.g. 'The role of *perfectionism* in student suicide'; Bell et al., 2010) and teacher *perfectionism* ('Do you want me to be perfect?'; Childs and Stoeber, 2012).

Therefore *perfectionism* in UK schools is largely unexplored. The reason for this is unclear. The current research contributes to this field of study to begin to fill this gap.

The literature is, however, growing, reflecting an increasing interest in the field over the past two decades, emerging from the varied disciplines of psychology, health, counselling and education. For example, an online journal search for articles containing the word *perfectionism* entered during the year 2015 revealed 112 articles in that year alone (EBSCO; 22.12.15), compared with just 48 from the year 2000, and there appear to be increasing ProQuest dissertations in the area, perhaps indicating a new generation of academic and applied interest in the topic. Now is therefore the ideal time to contribute to the literature through the specific application of educational psychology. As awareness is raised about the links between *perfectionism* and negative outcomes, contributions to this research area may increase further.

Conflicted. Within the small research base there are a number of conflicting ideas, including differing definitions of *perfectionism* and categories of *perfectionist*, its origin, how *perfectionism* can be measured and 'treated' and whether it can be considered beneficial. There is no clear research into individuals' understanding of the *perfectionism* construct. Studies instead make initial assumptions about what *perfectionism* is, proceed to 'measure' it in participants using self-rating scales, then attempt to 'treat' it. This disregards the individual student's values, attitudes and beliefs which may present barriers to change, or strengths on which to grow. It also misses the unique perspectives individuals around the student are likely to have on

perfectionism, which are likely to inform their behaviour towards that student. The current research explores the construct of *perfectionism* for a sample of UK students, parents and school staff to provide a new, interpretivist insight to the *perfectionism* literature. This original perspective challenges the current body of more 'medicalised' research by viewing students high in *perfectionism* as individuals with unique strengths and beliefs, moving away from the notion of 'treatment' to meeting individual need in order to help students develop and reach self-actualisation based upon their personal values.

Risks and benefits. Further rationale for the research comes from the dominant theme within the limited literature of a link between *perfectionism* and problematic outcomes, such as the development and maintenance of a range of mental health problems in young people and adults (Egan, Wade and Shafran, 2011). Petersson, Perseius and Johnson (2014) claim *perfectionism* is considered a central and aggravating aspect of psychiatric conditions (p.409). Specifically, associations have been made between high levels of *perfectionism* and anxiety (Blankstein and Lumley, 2015), depression (Affrunti and Woodruff-Borden, 2014), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Park et al., 2015) and eating disorders (Boone, Claes and Luyten, 2014), as well as poor treatment outcomes unless specifically targeted (Morris and Lomax, 2014). It is also significant that treatment outcomes for other conditions are generally worse if underlying *perfectionism* is not also treated (e.g. obsessive-compulsive personality disorder; OCPD, Pinto et al., 2011).

Perfectionism also has links with autism spectrum condition (ASC) (Greenaway and Howlin, 2010), specifically Asperger's syndrome (Fung, 2009), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Conners et al., 1998). There are also a number of issues relating to education, including the association between *perfectionism* and school refusal (Atkinson et al., 1989), insomnia (Azevedo et al., 2010), headaches (Kowal and Pritchard, 1990) and the socially problematic expression of anger (Hewitt et al., 2002), including both physical and verbal aggression (Öngen, 2009). However, providing a conflicting view, *perfectionism* has also been linked with achievement, engagement, emotional wellbeing and positive outcomes (e.g. Jowett et al., 2016; Lundh, 2004; Wang, Yuen and Slaney, 2009). This confusion is a relevant issue for those working with students demonstrating a high level of *perfectionism*; how key adults choose to respond is likely to depend on their beliefs about the associated risks or benefits. The current research therefore explores these beliefs, particularly concerning the identification of the associated risks asserted in the existing literature.

Link with suicide. Suicide is among the leading causes of death in young people (Snaith, 2015), and can have a devastating impact on their family and community. The predominant rationale for the current research comes from the concerning and perhaps under-recognised link that is increasingly made between *perfectionism* and suicide (e.g. Flett, 2014); recent suggestions are that it may be a bigger risk factor than previously thought (Nauert, 2014). A UK report revealed that almost a third of young people have contemplated or attempted suicide (Owen, 2013), citing contributing factors which may be related to *perfectionism*: pressure from schoolwork, feeling like a failure, fear of the future, lack of confidence and a sense of isolation (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2015). This may

be particularly pertinent among young men (for whom suicide is the leading cause of death), as suicidal intentions and vulnerability may be difficult to detect when hidden behind a *perfectionistic* need to preserve an image of flawless competency (Törnblom, Werbart and Rydelius, 2013). Secrecy about mental health problems and suicidality, a recognised feature of adolescence (Friedman, 2006), is likely to be heightened for those high in self-stigma, whose accomplishments may deflect attention from feelings of inadequacy and self-destructive tendencies (Sorotzkin, 1998). Further, students who are cooperative and compliant in school (Albano, Chorpita and Barlow, 2003) may be overlooked due to perceived competency and act impulsively upon their hidden psychological distress (Bolton et al., 2008).

Flett and Hewitt (2012) describe the link between *perfectionistic* self-criticism, self-doubt and suicide as an important public health issue to be addressed, but there is little knowledge of the awareness of this or how to address it amongst school staff, parents or young people themselves, particularly in a UK context. The current research explores these issues in a tentative way, offering insight into awareness of this link in a sample of UK students, parents and school staff.

Lack of early or systemic intervention. Evidence suggests *perfectionism* increases over time (Siegle and Schuler, 2000), and is “notoriously difficult to treat” in adults (Shafran and Mansell, 2001; p.900). Various American resources for schools, parents and children advocate early intervention (e.g. Adelson and Wilson, 2009; Burns, 2008; Pett, 2012), but there has been little systematic work exploring this. If, as suggested by the predominance of HE studies in the literature,

perfectionists are more likely to be high-achievers, who are unlikely to seek support when required and who perhaps develop mental health problems only once they have left school, it is possible that schools fail to support such 'at risk' students since they may present no real problems within school. However, I am anecdotally aware from educational psychology service (EPS) casework of students demonstrating problematic behaviours resembling *perfectionism* nearing exam time, with school feeling helpless to provide meaningful support, resulting in frustration for all concerned and ultimately underachievement. It may therefore be that underachievers are high in *perfectionism.* The different types of *perfectionists* identified in the literature will be addressed more specifically later.

Analysis of the adult literature reveals little evidence of eco-systemic approaches, implying a 'within-person' focus which may not be entirely helpful, particularly for younger people. The current research tentatively explores ideas for early intervention and systemic support amongst students, parents and school staff, alongside more evidence-based recommendations for individual intervention.

1.2 The current climate

Educational context. Schools are under increased pressure to achieve high academic standards for all students (Moon, 2006). This is a combination of pressure felt systemically due to Ofsted's 'satisfactory' category being replaced with the more demanding label, 'requires improvement', which carries consequences for the future of the school, including possible dismissal of the senior leaders, and pressure on staff due to the increase in academies and performance-related pay. Teaching

unions have suggested this all places “unnecessary stress” on the school community (Ratcliffe, 2014). When considering the psychodynamic impact of teaching and learning, it is also relevant that recent news reports suggest “teacher stress levels in England are soaring” (Precey, 2015). This applies to both organisational psychodynamics, for example as explored by Obholzer and Roberts (1994) within ‘human services’, and those at an individual level, for example as discussed by Salzberger-Wittenberg and Osborne (1999). The effect of these additional stress factors upon students high in *perfectionism* is unexplored, however my understanding of psychodynamic theory applied to both individuals and groups suggests a potential area of concern; such pressured environments could put those high in *perfectionism* at risk of mental ill health.

There is particular interest in the literature around *perfectionism* in the high-achieving population, with debates over achievement encouraging (Morris and Lomax, 2014) or acting as a safeguard against (Neumeister, 2004) ‘maladaptive *perfectionism’*. If students high in *perfectionism* are likely to also be high-achievers, schools may fail to notice or ignore signs of internalised distress in these students as they present high value to the school as ‘star pupils’ (Hartley-Brewer, 2015); other students may present with greater ‘need’ of emotional support and staff may even fear attainment will *decrease* if resources are spent addressing high-achievers’ emotional wellbeing. This, however, is conjecture based upon trainee EP (TEP) fieldwork observations and lacks supporting literature.

Student emotional wellbeing is a current school priority, demonstrated through Ofsted's greater focus on safeguarding, and commonly used interventions such as social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) (DfES, 2007), Thrive, nurture groups, mindfulness and emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs). A major challenge for schools is balancing the improvement of attainment with improving emotional wellbeing, without one jeopardising the other. In their nurture group materials for staff, Bennathan and Boxall (1998) stated in reference to younger children that:

> emotional and cognitive development cannot…be considered separately (p.14).

Older students' cognitive development may also benefit from supporting their emotional wellbeing, reflecting Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of human need model, commonly used in contemporary EP work. The EP plays a valuable role here in understanding education systems and child development, remaining informed of current evidence-based practice, and holding an influential position within the systems around the child.

Regarding emotional wellbeing, *perfectionism* is linked with serious forms of psychopathology (Egan, Wade and Shafran, 2011), however UK-based resources offering advice to schools and families for supporting students high in *perfectionism* are lacking. The range of American resources available to the general public may lack applicability to a UK population and therefore students, parents and staff may struggle to identify with the content, for example cultural differences in language use or education systems. A UK-based resource integrating the latest knowledge and understanding of *perfectionism* in students would support the current school priority

of raising standards in student mental health, with the potential for associated gains in academic achievement. This latter outcome is likely to be a stronger motivator for schools given the above pressures.

In their non-UK study, Flett and Hewitt (2014, p.899) assert that *perfectionism* is "highly prevalent among children and adolescents", supporting the suggestion that internationally over a quarter of students are 'maladaptive *perfectionists'* (Chan, 2009; Rice, Ashby and Gilman, 2011). The scale of the issue is not entirely clear due to the confusing literature, but *perfectionism* may affect more students than previously thought and hence underlie many issues causing concern for schools, particularly considering its link with ASC, ADHD, anxiety and school refusal. If these findings are valid and generalisable to the UK, it may be helpful for UK key adults to be better informed about the risks of *perfectionism* and associated individual needs. The current study explores secondary rather than primary schools as *perfectionism* may be more of a problem once the student is in an environment requiring increased flexibility and adaptability, compared to the primary classroom which arguably offers more order, routine, predictability and overall 'containment'. Beliefs are also likely to have become more engrained by this point and therefore appear more evident, particularly during times when the student must negotiate competing pressures; an important aspect of adolescent development.

This topic therefore has relevance for educational psychology as it concerns the potential for systemic awareness-raising and guidance, and also school-based intervention for those students struggling with their learning, behaviour or emotional

wellbeing as a result of, or aggravated by, *perfectionism*. This topic also has relevance for students high in *perfectionism* who are *not* displaying signs of difficulty; a potential role for the EP could be to raise awareness amongst school staff of the emotional needs of those students appearing to cope well with the challenges of school, but who may be hiding behind a façade (Flett and Hewitt, 2014). This has particular relevance in the current educational climate in which pressures to succeed are high for all involved. The consultation and supervisory role of the EP could include supporting auxiliary staff, such as ELSAs, working with this vulnerable group within school.

There is also relevance in considering the SEND reforms (DfE, 2014); EPs may now encounter young people struggling with *perfectionism* up to the age of 25. Since times of transition may be particularly challenging for students high in *perfectionism*, including accessing HE (e.g. Flett et al., 2008), EPs could support settings to plan transitions and monitor progress. The agenda for increased multi-agency working may involve opportunities to collaborate with child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for students vulnerable to mental health difficulties due to *perfectionist* cognitions.

Political context. Schools' focus on children's mental health reflects the current political agenda, with arguments from senior National Health Service (NHS) England and Department of Health officials that it should become a national ambition with increased funding and school input (Triggle, 2015), recognising that it has been chronically underfunded for decades (Cooke, 2014). This acknowledges the

increased rates of stress and related mental health problems amongst UK school students (Burns, 2015), for example two large teaching associations claimed that schools are struggling to deal with rising numbers of students self-harming, due to reduced access to specialist support (Whitworth, 2015), and there has been particular interest over recent years in the potentially harmful effects of social media on young people's mental health, as highlighted in this excerpt from The Guardian:

> social media is harming the mental health of teenagers…the pressure to be perfect and always 'on' is overwhelming (Udorie, 2015).

Students high in *perfectionism* could be amongst the most vulnerable of these due to self-induced pressures and self-defeating attributions of their experiences, and their link with eating disorders and self-harm (Dour and Theran, 2011; O'Connor, Rasmussen and Hawton, 2010).

Large amounts of funding have recently been provided to children's services and the NHS for addressing mental health needs as early as possible, reflecting the argument that early care is better for individuals in the long-term *and* value for money (Cooke, 2014). This is significant since around half of young adults with mental health problems experience difficulties before they are 15 (Booth, 2016). It is for this reason that year 9 and 10 students were chosen for the current study. The current government are proposing a mental health service reform, including a focus on suicide prevention, with Care Minister Alistair Burt stating "we must never stop talking about children and young people's mental health" (2016) and producing a range of online support resources for parents. Within the public eye, Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge has also raised the profile of children's mental health (Place2Be, 2015).

There is direct relevance for schools in developing earlier, school-based intervention and formal tuition on mental health, particularly considering the increasing pressures facing CAMHS (Buchanan, 2015). Many students who could benefit from psychological support may not meet the increasingly high thresholds to access needed services, or their likelihood for self-presentation and self-concealment (Flett et al., 2014) means they are unlikely to seek help when needed (Mackinnon, Sherry and Pratt, 2013). When coupled with being highly likely to complete suicide attempts due to their "thorough and precise suicide plans" (Nauert, 2014), *perfectionist* students may be extremely vulnerable due to this double risk. There could be a role here for EPs to embrace the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme (NHS, 2006) to develop therapeutic specialisms which may help to bridge this gap, begun by some EPSs already. The introduction of the social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) category of SEND (DfE, 2014) further recognises this political priority and helps ensure schools are more aware of 'invisible' conditions to remove the perceived embarrassment and increase the likelihood that signs are spotted and acted upon (Snaith, 2015).

A focus on students' mental health and emotional wellbeing has also been brought to the awareness of parents, through media reports of increased rates of stress and related mental health problems amongst schoolchildren (e.g. The Guardian, 2014). This includes increases in self-harming, anxiety and depression (Samaritans, 2015; The Times, 2015), conditions highly correlated with *perfectionism* (Afshar et al., 2011; Essau et al., 2008; O'Connor, Rasmussen and Hawton, 2010), along with cases of high-achieving student suicides (e.g. Burgess, 2015; Folksy, 2014; Jackson, 2004). Despite the limitations of media sources, they do reflect the wider

political climate which is important to recognise, notably that despite a high correlation between *perfectionism* and mental health issues in academic research (e.g. Bell et al., 2010; Caelian, 2005), the UK media is yet to make this link explicit. It is therefore unlikely schools and families make this link. It does, however, highlight the current focus on youth mental health which is valuable for the current research. The increased interest following the SEND reforms (DfE, 2014) in families being central to decision-making and increased multi-agency work has direct relevance for the EP using their skills to elicit the 'voice' of families affected by *perfectionism*-related mental health problems, and working alongside other professionals, such as those within CAMHS, to support vulnerable students.

Psychological context. Within educational psychology, an eco-systemic model is commonly used for addressing issues of assessment and intervention, along with eliciting the individual voices of those involved using psychological tools such as motivational interviewing, PCP and psychodynamic techniques. An increasing move towards multi-agency working is also evident. The current study is original in its ecosystemic rather than within-child perspective and its production of a helpful, targeted and accessible UK resource through multidisciplinary team (MDT) collaboration. It is also rigorous in its use of appropriate methodology, including a thorough literature review.

The current context for EPSs is the move towards a traded delivery model, meeting the identified priorities of schools. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity relating to students high in *perfectionism*. The challenge is whether schools perceive

this as an issue worthy of resources (including EP time), particularly if students demonstrate no immediate or obvious difficulties. A further challenge is the difficulty identifying something which might manifest in different ways; *perfectionism* may pass by unrecognised, be attributed to something else, and vary between individuals. The EP plays a valuable role in helping the adults around the young person identify the function of behaviours and underlying need. The opportunity arises both reactively to support those students who appear to be underachieving as a result of anxiety relating to *perfectionism*, and proactively in implementing universal approaches to teaching and learning which may benefit the emotional wellbeing of students high in *perfectionism*, resulting in better outcomes for all. A conflict arising here is the consideration of the current context, in which schools are under pressure to achieve ever-improving outcomes in the form of narrowly-defined statutory examination grades; in such a context *perfectionism* might be viewed by some staff and adults as a positive attribute. This is pertinent and discussed in more depth later.

The current research study is relevant for children, schools and families and the practice of educational psychology within the current educational, political and psychological context, so is justified in:

1) contributing to the evidence base of *perfectionism* in UK schools through exploring the constructs of students, staff and parents,

2) exploring how schools can proactively support the emotional wellbeing and related learning of students high in *perfectionism*,

and

3) considering the role of the EP in supporting this systemic process.

1.3 The journey to the research topic

It is important to recognise the influence of the researcher on the research since research is guided by the researcher's own construct system, and interpretative research in particular requires the researcher to be an active part of the process. I was therefore an integral member of the social research environment, with my personal values guiding each stage of the study.

The research topic is grounded in personal and professional experiences. I studied at an independent girls' grammar school, an environment demonstrating a powerful 'fixed mindset' (Dweck, 2006) culture of innate intelligence and a pervasive atmosphere of achievement. My model for teaching and learning was one of competition and status, rather than risk-taking and learning from mistakes. Conformity received more reinforcement than creativity; attainment more than progress. Expectations were high for behaviour and grades but not balance and friendship. During my school years and beyond, close friends experienced mental health difficulties as a result of what I now perceive as *perfectionist* thinking, resulting in abandoned degree courses, frequent job moves and failed relationships. They achieved remarkable results in school examinations, yet appeared unable to manage the pressures of adult life. I question whether things would differ for them had they attended a different school during their formative years, or whether it was something about their family culture or them as individuals which predisposed them to the path of self-criticism and stress.

Despite environmental pressure to study something more 'traditional', I studied

psychology at undergraduate and postgraduate level at the University of York, delighted to learn about multiple intelligences, identity development and suggestibility. This strongly influenced the research by providing a basis of celebrating individual difference, working with peoples' strengths, and understanding the formation of core beliefs. However it also instilled in me a positivist approach to research; expanding further into my worldview through mental health support work, which highlighted the damaging effects of dichotomous thinking and unrealistic high standards, both signs of *perfectionism*, on young adults, the resistance of these deep-rooted cognitions to change, and the need for highly specialised and focused interventions. I recognise now that a perspective based around personality psychology and psychopathology had by this point become ingrained. I became motivated by the idea of early intervention, at which point I trained as a primary school teacher at the University of York St John, advocating the early positive development of the 'whole child'.

However, during my years as a primary school teacher I became aware of the pressures facing teachers and the impact of this on students, particularly amongst those teachers I would consider *perfectionists;* 'developing the whole child' got lost beneath the expectations relating to literacy and numeracy outcomes. My class passing the Year 1 phonics screening test appeared more important to senior leaders, school governors and parents than the children's ability to form friendships, manage their emotions and develop a healthy view of themselves as learners. I observed early signs of a 'fixed mindset' in children and a cultural tendency for adults to attribute different explanations for children's behaviour based upon factors such as gender or achievement levels. For example, as a generalisation, reluctance to

work was attributed to *perfectionism* for high-achieving girls, but to defiance or laziness in low-achieving boys. I also noticed a tendency to attribute *perfectionism* to parenting or birth order, and a resignation that "that's just the way s/he is". These constructs are likely to strongly influence how children are treated and the development and maintenance of *perfectionist* cognitions.

More positively, I became aware of the value of the adult and early intervention in shaping children's learning and development. Studying at the University of Exeter has taught me a humanistic approach which provides the positive psychology underpinning the research, and made me reflect on how EPs can support the emotional wellbeing of students high in *perfectionism*. In EPS work I am aware of the expectations placed upon staff and transmitted to students in different settings, and am reflecting on how students high in *perfectionism* cope with academic and social pressures in different environments. Although I notice many schools promote a 'growth mindset' in policy and sometimes in practice, I wonder how effective this is for something as engrained as *perfectionism*.

Through my doctoral training I have developed both a psychodynamic and ecosystemic perspective, enabling me to view *perfectionist* behaviours in terms of parenting experiences, transference of this to the school context, and transactional analysis of all the individuals involved. I therefore included parents and school staff in the study as well as students, also supporting a community psychology approach (MacKay, 2006) and hearing the views of parents regarding SEND (Lamb, 2009). This is my first study using a participatory research approach and is strongly guided by a critical emancipatory voice based upon these personal and professional

experiences. This approach advocates a:

> mutual curiosity about the knowledge and ability of those on the "other side" and what one can learn from them is so important (Bergold and Thomas, 2012).

The nature of this research is that all participants change considerably in the course of the process, both on a personal and cognitive level. This is explored more in my reflexive account of the research in the Discussion, however it is important at this point to note that during the research journey my thinking evolved from a positivist perspective to a more interpretivist viewpoint, a valuable shift for me as a researcher and practitioner psychologist. I have been required to consider multiple perspectives, yet needed also to draw upon more positivist ideas in order to promote and shape the research.

1.4 The research problem

Although there are various professional opinions regarding the construct of *perfectionism* in the literature, it is not known what UK students, parents and school staff think about it. This includes their awareness of the risks associated with *perfectionism* in the international literature, and their ideas for early intervention specific to their UK context. The use of qualitative approaches to uncover the meaning of *perfectionism* to individuals is a clear gap. There is a dominant theme in the literature of individual 'treatment', but no clear guidance on more systemic interventions nor a more positive focus maximising strengths and attributes, regarding the 'whole person' rather than reducing or extinguishing 'negative' attributes. There is also no indication of a role for the UK EP or MDT in supporting schools and families to support students high in *perfectionism*.

Therefore, the overall aims of this research were:

1. to contribute to the knowledge on *perfectionism* in education by exploring the perspectives of a sample of UK students, parents and school staff (Phase One)
2. to produce and provisionally evaluate guidance for schools and families on how best to support the emotional wellbeing needs of students who may be high in *perfectionism* (Phase Two).

Phase One research questions. Given the lack of research into what schools and families understand by *perfectionism* and the varied definitions of *perfectionism* available, the first phase explores the knowledge and understanding of students, parents and school staff regarding the construct and the needs of students high in *perfectionism*. Its specific focus, based on the dominant discourse in the literature, is on the identification of any gaps in awareness, or beliefs which may contribute to the risks associated with *perfectionism*, and on ideas for supporting such students. Another layer to this phase involves a tentative exploration of the identification of *perfectionism* and whether this is consistent across participants and myself without any formal 'tools'. The particular research questions and sub-questions relating to these aims are as follows:

1. What different conceptions of *perfectionism* are to be found amongst young people, parents and teachers?

    1a. what do young people, parents and teachers think *perfectionism* looks like?

    1b. how do young people, parents and teachers think *perfectionism* arises?

1c. what risks and benefits do young people, parents and teachers associate with *perfectionism*?

1d. what are the participants' thoughts on the changeability of *perfectionism?*

2. What kind of contradictions and potential issues emerge in these constructions of *perfectionism*?

2a. what are the contradictions and potential issues in beliefs about what *perfectionism* looks like?

2b. what are the contradictions and potential issues in beliefs about in how *perfectionism* arises?

2c. what are the contradictions and potential issues in beliefs about in the risks and benefits associated with *perfectionism*?

2d. what are the contradictions and potential issues in beliefs about in the changeability of *perfectionism*?

3. Does this research approach provide sufficient information to identify students' needs?

3a. to what extent do self-rating, teacher-rating, parent-rating and researcher-rating correlate for student's 'level' of *perfectionism*?

3b. which aspects of the research approach were the most helpful for identifying possible needs relating to *perfectionism* amongst students?

Phase Two research questions. The second phase produced a provisional helpful resource for students, parents and school staff and explored preliminary evaluations of this. The intention of the resource was to raise awareness of *perfectionism*, and provide practical, proactive and reactive ideas to help support students high in *perfectionism* to achieve both success and emotional wellbeing. This phase involved data from Phase One, research literature, psychological theory and collaboration with other professionals, including practicing EPs. The overall aim was to produce something that could be of genuine value to students, parents and schools, taking into account issues of dissemination. The particular research questions relating to this aim are:

1. What may be considered helpful strategies for supporting students high in *perfectionism*?

    1a. what does the literature say about 'what works' for *perfectionism*?

    1b. what do external professionals think could be helpful for *perfectionism*?

    1c. what do other EPs think could be helpful for *perfectionism*?

    1d. what do students, parents and staff think could be helpful for *perfectionism*?

    1e. what psychological theories, not currently addressed in the literature, could apply to supporting *perfectionists*?

2. How can guidance most effectively be disseminated?

2a. what is considered ‘best practice’ for the dissemination of information for schools and families from the literature and EP experience?

2b. how does this relate to the wants and needs of the participants?

3. What do the participants think about the guidance?

3a. To what extent do participants feel the guidance is appropriate and effective in meeting their needs?

3b. What adaptations are required to develop the guidance to better meet the needs of the participants?

1.5 Overview

The study is therefore in two parts; the first explores individual constructions of *perfectionism* amongst Year 9 and 10 students, parents and school staff, focusing particularly on *perfectionism* in secondary school students attending ‘high-achieving’ UK schools. The second explores the design and evaluation of guidance for schools and families, based upon identified needs, psychological theory and recommended ‘interventions’ from the literature and practice. The literature review which follows further highlights the value of the research study in contributing theoretical and practical knowledge to the area.

2 Literature Review

This review has three sections: Section 2.1 describes how the literature review was conducted, and provides an overview of the construct of *perfectionism*. Section 2.2 provides a critical review of the childhood *perfectionism* literature, exploring the following areas:

1) Current research debates regarding the construct of childhood *perfectionism*
2) Research specifically investigating the role of schools and attitudes of school staff and parents in supporting students high in *perfectionism*
3) Literature on *perfectionism* interventions and the role of EPs in supporting schools with such interventions.

Section 2.3 summarises the gaps in the literature to clarify how this research study was conceptualised to contribute original and significant knowledge to the field, including discussion of participatory action research (PAR) principles and practices.

2.1 How the literature was selected

To identify research relevant for the study, searches were focused on four areas;

1. Childhood *perfectionism*
2. Schools, parents and *perfectionism*
3. *Perfectionism* interventions
4. EPs and *perfectionism*

A range of key words, search engines and journals (Table 1; Appendix A) were used over a twenty-month period (September 2014 – May 2016). To focus the review, inclusion of primary sources was initially restricted to those relevant to the research

questions and generalisable to the research study. However, due to the limited UK childhood *perfectionism* literature, there were three compromises:

1. overseas papers are predominant in the review, acknowledging cultural differences including education systems
2. the review was informed by clinical/social work and older student/adult research, acknowledging limited generalisability to UK schoolchildren
3. although the available literature spans across disciplines which inevitably influences the methodology of the studies, the majority of designs are empirical and very few employ interpretivist methods. A balanced perspective is attempted by inclusion of the few studies not addressing psychopathology and individual 'treatment'.

General internet searches provided national government initiatives and topical news reports. Information from book chapters is also included where relevant and a number of review papers helped to guide the literature selection.

Since no universal definition of *perfectionism* exists (Kearns, Forbes and Gardiner, 2007), the terms used in the review require clarification. In accordance with a number of studies, *perfectionism* in this review refers to:

> the overdependence of self-evaluation on the determined pursuit of personally demanding self-imposed standards in at least one highly salient domain, despite adverse consequences (Shafran, Cooper and Fairburn 2002; p.778).

The review also considers *perfectionism* as being sub-typed as described specifically for young people by Hewitt and colleagues (2011), shown in the following table:

Table 2

Sub-types of perfectionism (from Flett et al., 1997; Hewitt et al., 2011; Stoeber, 2015)

Sub-type (abbreviation)	**Description**	**Values and Beliefs**	**Behaviours**
Self-oriented *perfectionism (SOP)*	Setting very high personal standards, with non-attainment of goals leading to self-criticism	Striving for perfection and being perfect are important. Expect to be perfect and highly self-critical if they fail to meet these expectations.	Striving Self-criticism
Socially-prescribed *perfectionism (SPP)*	Perceiving that others have very high standards for the individual.	Striving for perfection and being perfect are important to others. Others expect them to be perfect and will be highly critical of them if they fail to meet these expectations.	Striving Self-criticism
Other-oriented *perfectionism (OOP)*	Setting very high standards for others.	It is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. Expect others to be perfect and highly critical of others who fail to meet these expectations.	Criticism of others

It is noticeable in the above and other categorisation systems that emotions are absent from descriptions; the focus is on behaviours and cognitions. This is explored further in the Discussion. There is also the difficulty that an individual may display more than one sub-type, yet this complexity is omitted from studies. There is an attempt in this review to focus on the SPP subtype, as "the perception that others demand perfection from the self" (Flett, Hewitt and Cheng, 2008; p.196) has clear links with environmental influences and therefore the opportunity for systemic intervention, resonating with the current psychological context of ecosystemic approaches to problem situations. SPP also has strong links in the literature with maladaptive outcomes, and has been found to be more prevalent amongst older children (Cook and Kearney, 2014; Stoeber and Stoeber, 2009), perhaps due to the teenage brain being more sensitive to social evaluation (Somerville, 2013), so is appropriate for the age group participating in this study. The term 'evaluative concerns *perfectionism'* (ECP) was also included in searches as it appears similar, being described as vulnerability to negative psychological outcomes due to:

> motives and values predominantly derived from pressures in the social environment (Mallinson et al., 2014; p.975).

This focus was challenged by authors categorising instead into 'normal' and 'neurotic' *perfectionism* (e.g. Hamachek, 1978), 'positive' and 'negative' *perfectionism* (e.g. Chan, 2007), 'adaptive *perfectionists'*, 'maladaptive *perfectionists'* and 'non-*perfectionists'* (e.g. Gnilka, Ashby and Noble, 2012), or using the broad term *perfectionism* with no clarification of its dimensions (e.g. Beevers and Miller, 2004). The reader must therefore be mindful of different interpretations of language when reviewing the literature. It remains unclear whether 'maladaptive *perfectionists'* are comparable to 'neurotic' or 'negative' *perfectionists*; these labels perhaps

represent differing constructs and hence slightly different populations. Where authors have used different terminology, this is in inverted commas in the review to indicate that SPP is not the explicit focus, and more commonly, where the literature remains unspecific, *perfectionism* is simply used. This lack of consensus on the construct of *perfectionism* is a powerful motivator for the current research.

Many people describe themselves as *perfectionists* (Dahl, 2014), but prevalence of *perfectionism*, particularly within schoolchildren, is difficult to ascertain for a number of reasons, some of which are described above. Where UK student samples have been used, these have been within HE institutes which presents a significant bias; not least of which is the omission of those students high in *perfectionism* who have not gone on to HE, perhaps as a direct result of their *perfectionism*. These would perhaps represent the more concerning students and hence the ones most 'valuable' within research. Additionally, the use of self-rating scales to identify participants (e.g. Neumeister, 2004) and levels of *perfectionism* (e.g. Ashby et al., 2012) is problematic; the social desirability bias (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960) is likely to be particularly high amongst this population, rendering samples unrepresentative. The use of different rating scales also makes comparisons challenging, since different assessments reflect different conceptualisations of the *perfectionism* construct. The use of alternative 'measures', such as parent or teacher reports, and exploration of individuals' unique experiences of *perfectionism* (e.g. Slaney and Ashby, 1996) are rare, reflecting a positivist assumption about the nature of *perfectionism* and providing the motivation to investigate the construct in a more interpretivist way. The closest I uncovered to this personalised approach was the study by Boone, Claes and Luyten (2014) which used a 'person-centred approach', however still based this

upon measurement scales followed by cluster analysis to group participants, and with such a large sample (460 adolescents) it feels challenging to conceptualise this as person-centred.

An internet search of *perfectionism* reveals the claim on a variety of websites that "approximately 30% of the general population suffers from *perfectionism*" (e.g. Nolan, 2014), with the suggestion that this is as high as 87% in the "gifted population" (e.g. Natcharian, 2010), 30% of this figure being "neurotic". Although studies are cited to support these figures (e.g. Schuler, 1999), the above limitations remain and must be acknowledged before making conclusions about the prevalence of *perfectionism*. Despite these limitations, there is no evidence to suggest this high prevalence may not be valid, and might also exist in the UK student population. If this is the case, particularly regarding the "neurotic" construct of *perfectionism*, it perhaps deserves more attention than previously received.

2.2 A critical review of the literature in the area

Current debates in the research field relating to childhood *perfectionism*.

The various dimensions of *perfectionism* are now explored, along with key psychological models of the development of *perfectionism*, including a reflection on the function of *perfectionist* behaviours. There is a discussion of the debates surrounding the impact of *perfectionism* on learning and behaviour, and an exploration of the risk and protective factors identified in the literature, all of which help to inform the research methodology.

Dimensions of perfectionism. As explained previously, the only consensus on *perfectionism* is its multidimensionality. In their thorough review of the childhood *perfectionism* literature, Morris and Lomax (2014) outline the most prevalent descriptions of *perfectionism* being used within six popular rating scales, summarised in Table 3 (Appendix B). All six scales highlight the dimension of 'high standards or expectations'. However, this is not an easily measurable quality, and is likely to be highly subjective. It may be that a *perfectionist* does not feel their standards or expectations are high, which may contribute to their distress when they fail to reach them. There appears to be agreement that *perfectionists* criticise themselves, though some scales suggest there are also *perfectionists* who criticise others (Perfectionistic Self Presentation Scale-Junior; PSPS-J). This may relate to a different underlying need, though this is not adequately addressed by any of the scales. The most descriptive in terms of individual need appears to be PSPS-J, which highlights information-processing factors and negative automatic thoughts, offering a clearer pathway for intervention than the broader dimensions described in the other scales. This is pertinent when considering the purpose of measurement; assessment without intervention appears unhelpful and suggests labelling rather than more usefully identifying need. The notion of 'problematizing *perfectionism'* was explored by Lippman (2012), who concluded that rather than pathologising individuals we should be "seeking out the societal ills that sparked the problem in the first place" (p.3). This advocates a more proactive and systemic approach than within-child labelling, although Lippman (2012) does not explore what can be done once an individual is displaying signs of 'problematic' *perfectionism*. It is likely that both proactive and reactive strategies are required, targeting both the wider social

and cultural environment, but also the individual. This multi-element approach is explored later.

Although these published scales are supported by factor and cluster analysis studies, ongoing work continues to re-group dimensions into new or merged themes, for example the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS)'s six factors have since been condensed into four (concerns and doubts, personal standards, parental pressure, organisation; Hawkins, Watt and Sinclair, 2006), demonstrating the instability of the *perfectionism* construct and disparity between authors. However, these studies often involve samples which are not readily comparable, for example Australian adolescent girls when the original scale was designed with a mixed sample of HE students. Importantly, Flett and Hewitt (2014) highlight the heterogeneity of children high in *perfectionism* regardless of conceptualisation or assessment. This view of individual differences is pertinent when working in a psychological way with children and young people. However, American EPs Adelson and Wilson (2009) categorise *perfectionist* children into groups; Academic Achievers, Aggravated Accuracy Assessors, Risk Evaders, Controlling Image Managers and Procrastinating *Perfectionists*. These labels may have some value in identifying specific behaviours and employing related interventions, however a child-focused approach would seek to explore and understand the individual circumstances for each young person to inform intervention, rather than attempting to label and treat accordingly. This supports Flett and Hewitt's (2014) discussion of individualising and tailoring interventions to address the unique factors involved.

In another example of the difficulties with language use, 'self-promotion' (PSPS-J) may have similarities with 'need for admiration' (The Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale for Children; AMPS), although these attributes could be underpinned by differing needs and hence cannot be considered immediately comparable. Sensitivity to Mistakes appears in a couple of the scales (AMPS, FMPS), but only the AMPS explicitly mentions a link with self-esteem, despite self-evaluation appearing to be an important element of *perfectionism*. Only the FMPS explicitly mentions environmental factors (parental expectations and criticism) which indicates the dominant within-child model of *perfectionism*; the existing research largely examines the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of the child, rather than elements of their environment or their emotional experiences. For me, this appears to offer a place for educational psychology research.

An adaptive form of *perfectionism* is described in The Almost Perfect Scale – Revised (APS-R), and in reviews of The Child and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS). This varies between being related to self-oriented striving versus criticism, and having low discrepancy scores, so even within the positive conceptualisation there is discrepancy over its form. Within the literature, there is a range of language-use to describe a more adaptive and healthy variation of a *perfectionist*, the most common being 'healthy high-achiever'. Offering support to the current study from the medical field, the American Academy of Paediatrics (2014) argue there is a distinction to be made between 'healthy high-achievers' and *perfectionists*, echoing a growing theme in psychological research. In a review of the literature, Greenspon (2000) asserts that "healthy *perfectionism* is an oxymoron" (p.197) and it may be dangerous to children's development to believe otherwise. He strongly promotes this

in his American "guide for kids" on managing their *perfectionism* (Greenspon, 2007), distinguishing between the attributes of 'trying to do well' and *perfectionism*, then later between *perfectionism* and 'the pursuit of excellence' (2014), supporting UK-based researchers Shafran, Egan and Wade (2010) who asserted that:

> it is very important for us to be clear about the difference between *perfectionism* and the *healthy pursuit of excellence* or *striving for achievement* (p.14).

However, the attempt by these authors to define the differences between the two lacks clarity, which may present a barrier to change for those high in *perfectionism*. This conflict over the value of *perfectionism* remains unexplored in the UK, but in agreement with Lippman (2012), the current research argues:

> considering the prevalence of *perfectionist* thinking in cases of depression and eating disorders, why do some scholars continue to assert that *perfectionism* can be healthy? (p.3).

It is pertinent to the current study that "*perfectionism* is a valued attribute in high-achieving populations" (Bell et al., 2010; p.254). The use and interpretation of language may be key to understanding this apparent conflict, and is explored briefly next.

The "opposite" of perfectionism. A helpful way to understand a construct is to consider what it is not; this PCP approach involves finding out what is denied by the description (Beaver, 2011; p.92). Only one published scale describes a 'non-*perfectionist'* (APS-R), albeit in a limited and vague way; 'those with average high standards scores'. Within positive psychology, the word 'optimalist' (Ben-Shahar, 2009) has evolved to describe someone with *realistic* high standards and a more compassionate view of themselves and others. Positive psychology focuses on the strengths that enable individuals to thrive, founded on the belief that:

> people want to live meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play (The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, 2016).

Related to the current study, positive psychology would posit that students high in *perfectionism* are driven to enhance their experiences, in order to find a sense of meaning and fulfilment. I suggest that the process by which they try to achieve this actually performs as a barrier towards these goals, if the definition of *perfectionism* being used by this study is assumed. Introducing a new word, 'optimalism', moves away from previously unsuccessful attempts to maximise the 'positive' elements of *perfectionism* and minimise the 'negative', by instead recognising this drive towards meaning and fulfilment, and providing a new perspective from which to perceive success. Compared with *perfectionists*, 'optimalists' are considered to have a 'healthy mentality'; their thought processes are more balanced, their activities more diverse and they experience greater emotional wellbeing. This requires robust evidence, but appears a promising way of conceptualising the opposite of *perfectionism*, if certain features of *perfectionism* are assumed, for example the dimensions of unreasonable high standards and self-criticism. It also mirrors a 'growth mindset'. Rather than encouraging students to be *perfect* or perform *perfectly*, it may be more beneficial for their emotional wellbeing and subsequent achievement that we instead encourage them to be *optimal* and perform *optimally*; the focus shifts to doing only what is needed for a favourable result, compassionately taking into account all factors. It might be that 'healthy *perfectionists'* and 'adaptive *perfectionists'* could be more helpfully conceptualised as 'optimalists', removing the link with a more negative construct. This is explored more in the Discussion.

Considering the bigger picture, *perfectionism* is included as a measure on the Child Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale (McWhinnie et al., 2009), the Eating Disorder Inventory-Child (Franko et al., 2004; Leung, Wang and Tang, 2004) and the Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children (March et al., 1997), with a similarly described subscale of 'Just Right' on the Childhood Routines Inventory (Evans et al., 1997). Whether *perfectionism* is at the root of these other issues, is an integral 'symptom' of them or is a side effect is undetermined, and again the different definitions used makes comparison of scales complex.

Dimensions used in the current study. When producing guidance for schools and families, it is important to encourage evidence-based practice and share the most current, robust research. Due to the discrepancies in the dimensions of *perfectionism*, but recognising the peer-reviewed support for each scale, the dimensions from the six scales were amalgamated into 13 factors shown in Table 4, with their 'opposites' extrapolated into factors comprising 'optimalism', using Ben-Shahar's (2009) constructs. This provided a framework for the current study for exploring the knowledge and understanding of students, parents and staff regarding the dimensions of *perfectionism*. Using the bipolar construct notion from PCP, this can perhaps best be considered as a spectrum, with *perfectionism* and 'optimalism' at opposite poles. The term *perfectionism* is therefore used merely as a descriptor for a collection of attributes rather than as a 'condition' label, which could be stigmatising and unhelpful. The implication is that everyone resides somewhere along the spectrum, showing more or fewer signs of *perfectionism*, perhaps at different times and in different situations. This provides a more fluid and dynamic conceptualisation which may help instigate change, rather than assuming there

exists some threshold at which point one is considered a *perfectionist*. The notion of a spectrum is suggested by existing authors, for example American clinical psychologist Szymanski's (2011, p.176) seven-point continuum for adults which highlights different points on the spectrum depending on which domain is the focus. However this continuum used the terms 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' *perfectionism*, which the current study sought to avoid, instead encouraging moving away from the notion of *perfectionism* altogether. This is based upon the definition being used for this research, the implications of which are the need for a more positive opposite.

Table 4

Factors of perfectionism and 'optimalism'

Factors relating to *perfectionism*	**Published scales utilising these factors**	**Factors relating to 'optimalism'**
Eager to please/approval-seeking	*PCI*	Self-assured
Concern pre-task	*AMPS*	Excitement for a challenge
Doubts during task	*FMPS*	Confidence in ability
Conscientious and organised	*AMPS; FMPS*	Conscientious and organised where appropriate, more flexible and dynamic

High expectations/standards for self	*AMPS; APS-R; CAPS; FMPS; PCI; PSPS-J*	Reasonable standards for self, including self-forgiveness
Concern over mistakes post-task	*AMPS; CAPS; FMPS; PCI*	Learn from mistakes
Need for admiration	*AMPS*	Secure in self
High parental pressure	*FMPS*	Parental support and encouragement
Perfectionistic self-promotion	*PCI; PSPS-J*	Modest and fair about own strengths and limitations
Nondisclosure of imperfection	*PSPS-J*	Able to share difficulties and open to suggestions
Feel have to do their best all the time	*PCI*	Feel have to do their best when appropriate
Feel have to be the best all the time	*PCI*	Feels doing their best is more important than being the best; progress over 'winning'
Perceive others to expect highly of them	*CAPS; PCI; PSPS-J*	Perceive others have realistic expectations of them

Domains of perfectionism. There is little known about the domains of life affected by *perfectionism,* and only one scale which includes them (Perfectionism

Questionnaire; PQ; Rhéaume, Freeston and Ladouceur, 1994). This scale suggests 22 domains, contrasting with Canadian researchers Hewitt and Flett (1991), who originally viewed *perfectionism* as a general disposition affecting all domains. These authors later distinguished between people higher in *perfectionism* as having more domains affected than those low in *perfectionism* (Flett and Hewitt, 2002), but there is little agreement on the exact domains. For example, Slaney and Ashby (1996) identified 11 domains, although based this on a small sample using only participants high in *perfectionism* so may not be applicable to unselected samples, and Shafran, Egan and Wade (2010) suggest 19 domains in their cognitive-behavioural interpretation of *perfectionism*.

In a peer-reviewed UK study of a large sample of university students and Internet users, Stoeber and Stoeber (2009) utilised the 22 domains identified in the PQ, concluding that:

> while some *perfectionists* may be *perfectionistic* across domains, most *perfectionists* are *perfectionistic* only in selected domains (p.531),

with ‘work’ and ‘studies’ being the areas in which people were ‘most *perfectionistic’*, and ‘bodily hygiene’ also ranking highly; a domain of life absent within the SOP/SPP/OOP categorisation of *perfectionists*. However it is possible that the participants were not a representative sample, not least of which being predominantly female, acknowledged by the authors. If participants were involved in sport to a high level rather than study, they would perhaps rate sporting performance more highly, as demonstrated by Dunn, Gotwals and Dunn (2005). Similarly with musical or artistic pursuits.

The domains identified in the literature are grouped into the following nine, broad areas for the purposes of this study, acknowledging these are not evidence-based for school students:

- Studies
- Appearance
- Health
- Relationships
- Organisation
- Leisure
- Written/spoken presentation
- Eating habits
- Time management

Models of the development of *perfectionism.* Based upon their review of the literature, Morris and Lomax (2014) hypothesise an ecosystemic developmental model for 'maladaptive (SPP and 'self-oriented critical') *perfectionism'* and 'adaptive ('self-oriented striving') *perfectionism'*. Within the current research, the latter is considered under the terminology 'optimalism' in agreement with Greenspon (2000) that "healthy *perfectionism* is an oxymoron" (p.197) and the belief that language use strongly affects interpreted meaning. The ecosystemic model incorporates five considerations; parenting, attachment, intergenerational transmission, cognitive processes and the environment. The predominant etiological discourse is that the development and maintenance of *perfectionism* is mediated by an interaction between these factors (e.g. Chan, 2009; Flett et al., 2002). The current research

explores student, parent and staff awareness of this. Each factor is now briefly considered, followed by reflections on the possible function of *perfectionism*.

Parenting. This social-learning perspective highlights the influence of significant others on children's development, reflected in dimensions of the widely-used FMPS (Frost et al., 1990), and the more recent Perfectionism Inventory (PI; Hill et al., 2004). SPP in particular is strongly associated with a 'pushy' or demanding style of parenting (Kenney-Benson and Pomerantz, 2005), shown through performance rather than learning goals (Dweck, 1986) and harsh expectations, which risk maladjustment and underachievement (Ablard and Parker, 1997). Interpreting rich data from qualitative interviews, Neumeister (2003, 2004) agreed that exposure to parental *perfectionism* and an authoritarian parenting style influences the development of SPP, with students themselves perceiving parental pressures to be causal. There is some evidence that gender may mediate the link between SPP and parenting (Hutchinson and Yates, 2008; Soenens et al., 2008), particularly among high-achieving participants (Basirion, Majid and Jelas, 2014; Miller, Lambert and Neumeister, 2012; Soysa and Weiss, 2014) although findings are inconsistent and based on non-UK samples. In their UK-based examination of a large sample of elite junior athletes and their parents, Appleton, Hall and Hill (2010) asserted that SPP may be acquired through young people modelling their caregivers' *perfectionism* as well as via parents' unrealistic expectations. Although this was based upon sporting performance rather than education, it provides some support for the parenting hypothesis and social pathways to the development of *perfectionism*.

Reflecting popular culture rather than peer-reviewed evidence, the parenting hypothesis is also suggested by the stereotypical narcissistic 'stage mother' pushing their child towards a perfect performance, dramatically portrayed in the 2010 psychological thriller 'Black Swan', in which psychotherapist Shure (2011) argues the lead character develops *perfectionism* as a defence mechanism to cope with her mother's parenting style. Similar themes are found in other cultures; the Asian-American 'tiger mother', for whom academic achievement reflects successful parenting (Chua, 2011), the Japanese 'Kyõiku Mama' ('education mother') and the 'Jewish mother' who purportedly has a critical drive for her children to succeed academically and professionally. All are anecdotally linked with anxiety, depression and suicide in young people, perhaps resulting from a *perfectionistic* style of relating to their world (e.g. Choi, Rogers and Werth Jr., 2009; Wang, Slaney and Rice, 2007). Quality evidence here is likely to remain elusive due to the highly sensitive and potentially culturally-damaging nature of the hypothesis, however the recent Prime Ministerial desire to incorporate key tenets of the 'Tiger Mother' approach into social policy (Cocozza, 2016) highlights the need for clarity at greater systemic levels.

Attachment. Linked with parenting, this relational perspective highlights the interactive influence of the child and carer through the emotional bonding process, receiving strong support in the literature (Enns, Cox and Clara, 2002; Stoeber, 1998). SPP is specifically linked with insecure attachment (Neumeister and Finch, 2006), for example Besharat, Azizi and Poursharifi (2011) found SPP and anxious-avoidant attachment styles correlated highly in adolescents, particularly relating to mothers. In their 'social disconnection model', Sherry and colleagues (2008) suggested SPP develops when individuals exhibit shame and a need for

belongingness as a result of early attachment insecurity or a lack of emotional attunement in the caregiver-child relationship, supported by a large-scale study with non-UK undergraduate students (Chen, Hewitt and Flett, 2015) and the finding that adolescents high in *perfectionism* display a greater need for social connection (Gilman, Rice and Carboni, 2014). A large-scale Turkish study also based on undergraduate students argued it is a combination of attachment and personality factors which contributes to the development of 'maladaptive *perfectionism'* (Ulu and Tezer, 2010).

Intergenerational transmission. This biological perspective highlights genetic influences, though receives little support. For example, Clark and Coker (2009) found links between levels of mother and daughter self-criticism but not between mother and child *perfectionism*, whereas Cook and Kearney (2009) found links between mother and sons' SPP and psychopathology, and more recently a link between maternal anxiety and *perfectionism* with SPP in both genders (Cook and Kearney, 2014). A consistent problem with comparing studies is the use of different *perfectionism* measures. Rice, Tucker and Desmond (2008) found a weak association between parent and child *perfectionism*, though did not account for gender differences which may have illuminated greater correlations. Weak associations between *perfectionism* and genetic components are demonstrated in the eating disorder literature (Tozzi et al., 2004; Wade and Bulik, 2007), suggesting at most a biological vulnerability towards *perfectionism*. This is reflected in debates over *perfectionism* being a distinct personality trait (e.g. Cattell and Mead, 2008; Hollender, 1978), or merely associated with personality traits, for example with 'neuroticism' in its negative form, 'conscientiousness' in its positive form (e.g. Rice,

Ashby and Slaney, 2007; Stumpf and Parker, 2000), 'openness to experience' (Basirion, Majid and Jelas, 2014), 'extraversion' (Ulu and Tezer, 2010) and 'agreeableness' (Parker, 1997). People's beliefs about personality traits is likely to affect how they perceive *perfectionism*.

Cognitive processes. Greenspon (2000) describes *perfectionism* as "a set of beliefs about oneself and one's relation to others" (p.205). The predominance of cognitive-behavioural 'treatment' literature highlights the popularity of this perspective, in which *perfectionism* is considered a cognitive process in which self-worth is based upon critical self-evaluation (Frost et al., 1990). Core schemas (Beck, 1995) may interact with environmental factors to mediate the development of *perfectionist* beliefs; individual coping strategies in response to the environment are therefore grounded in and maintained by the faulty core belief about the self; I am what I achieve (Pembroke, 2012), resulting in unrealistic expectations and a "self-destructive double-bind" (Weisinger and Lobsenz, 1981; p.281).

'Maladaptive *perfectionism'* has been found to be significantly predicted by cognitive errors (see Appendix Q), including catastrophising, overgeneralising, personalising, selective abstraction, dichotomous thinking (Davis and Wosinski, 2012; Egan et al., 2014), rumination (Brown and Kocovski, 2014; Flett et al., 2011), worry (Ashby et al., 2012) and disconnection and rejection schema (Maloney et al., 2014), and also with negative perceptions of school and family relationships and a perceived inability to consistently meet high standards (Gilman and Ashby, 2003). Focusing on SPP, Klibert, Langhinrichsen-Rohling and Saito (2005) found an association with

'maladaptive constructs' in a large American university sample, and more specifically 'concern over mistakes' (Arpen-Cribbie et al., 2008), 'personal standards' (Chan, 2009), 'striving', 'setting standards', self-doubt', 'fear of failure or negative social evaluations' (Mallinson et al., 2014), 'perceived racial discrimination' (Lambert, Robinson and Ialongo, 2014) and 'difficulty accepting the past' (Sherry et al., 2015) have been linked with psychopathological symptoms amongst those high in SPP. However it must be acknowledged that much of this research is based on non-UK 'gifted' samples.

Perfectionist cognitive processes may relate to a 'fixed mindset' (Dweck, 2006), performance (or achievement) rather than mastery (or learning) goals (Damian et al., 2014), and also with the self-determination theory of learning and motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2002). Students' focus may be on striving to do things perfectly rather than achieving 'self-actualisation' (Maslow, 1970), hence they are perhaps meeting a more basic motivational need of security, belonging or self-esteem. It may be that *perfectionism* develops as an avoidance-oriented coping mechanism (Flett et el.,2012; Gnilka, Ashby and Noble, 2012), explaining an early (but unconfirmed) correlation between *perfectionism* and survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Lindberg and Distad, 1985).

Environment. Environmental considerations include the influence of siblings (Surratt, 2008), peers (Lyman and Luthar, 2014), school academic environment (Neumeister, Williams and Cross, 2009), the wider cultural influence (Essau et al., 2008) and trauma (Morris and Lomax, 2014), although the relative influence of these

is difficult to ascertain and likely to be unique to the individual. Cultural differences often lack control in studies, despite evidence suggesting a strong cultural influence on *perfectionism* (Chan, 2007), for example 'shaming' in Eastern schooling. Although from a general sample of Swedish students, there is a suggestion that the comparison of themselves with high-performing siblings, or peers, may reflect an attempt by students to meet indirect parental or teacher expectations (Låftman, Almquist and Östberg, 2013), which has relevance for those with SPP. Another, more recent Swedish study suggested that eating disorders amongst teenage girls may result from *perfectionistic* traits arising from aspirational schools encouraging girls to try their best at all times (Bould, 2016). However, as reflected earlier, it is difficult to ascertain whether there are differences between school types that make *perfectionism* and related eating disorders more likely, or whether certain school types attract certain kinds of students and families who are more likely to display these things regardless of their school environment.

Environmental factors lack research as it has only recently been recognised that *perfectionism* exists "within a context of relationships with parents, peers, teachers, coaches, and others" (Fletcher, Neumeister and Flett, 2014; p.897), though Hewitt and Flett (1991) have consistently asserted that *perfectionism* must be considered from an interpersonal perspective.

The function of perfectionism. There is no clear research regarding the function of *perfectionism*. If behaviour is considered a form of communication (La Vigna and Willis, 1995), *perfectionist* behaviours may be conceptualised as

communicating something about the individual's needs. This is significant when considering effective intervention so that the cause of the *perfectionist* behaviours is targeted for lasting change, rather than superficially altering behaviours without addressing underlying needs. This may explain why attempts to change *perfectionism* have so far received little long-term support. The 'roots and leaves' model proposed by Shafran, Egan and Wade (2010) suggests that *perfectionism* is at the root of a variety of mental health conditions, and it is the underlying *perfectionism* we must address rather than focusing on, for example, the depression or eating disorder. I propose that we need to look even further than this. Considering the *perfectionism* as the root of such problems may be a first step, but actually confuse the situation due to inconsistent constructions, thereby further reinforcing the 'within-child' focus of personality psychology. To develop the metaphor and provide a more positive psychology perspective which promotes growth and change, the *perfectionism* is perhaps instead the stem of the plant, coming from the 'seed' of anxiety with a variety of possible 'roots' leading to its development. The difference between these models is partly the language-use; by identifying an underlying need in, for example, emotional regulation or social communication, intervention ideas become more apparent than using the term *perfectionism*. The two models are contrasted in Figure 1:

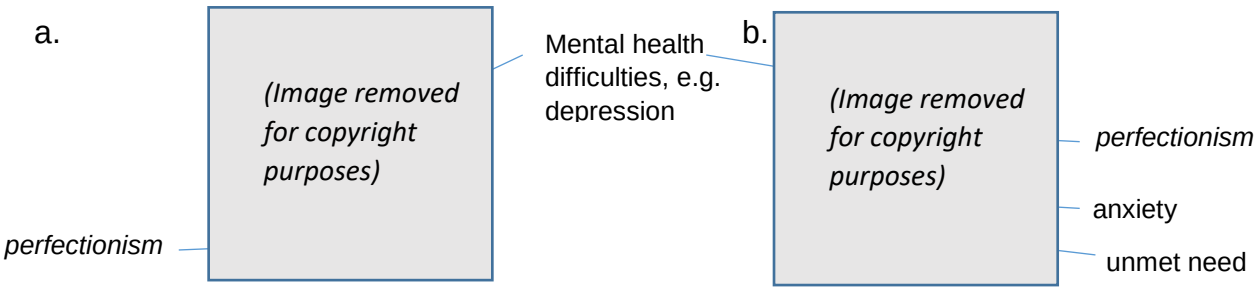

Figure 1. Shafran, Egan and Wade's (2010) roots and leaves model (a) and my proposed roots and leaves model (b)

This notion of *perfectionism* serving a function moves away from personality psychology and into more positive psychology, with a hopeful attitude of growth and change. Although the literature hints at possible functions of *perfectionism* through its etiological assumptions and (often-contradictory) intervention studies, there is currently nothing explicit about what function *perfectionism* may serve for the individual. This may be missing a significant area of consideration which may change the way in which *perfectionism* is approached. A particularly notable absence in the literature is the systemic thinking that addresses how the environment and individuals around the young person high in *perfectionism* can help to better meet these possible underlying needs, or contribute strategies to support difficulties. Included in this is the notion of a key attachment figure and emotional developmental approach, if the psychodynamic thinking apparent in the literature is adapted for intervention rather than halting at the assessment/identification stage.

Impact of *perfectionism*. The impact of *perfectionism* is discussed through correlational studies so must be interpreted cautiously; in reality, individuals are complex and their unique situation will determine the relative impact of their SPP. Emotionally, SPP is linked with feelings of failure, guilt and shame (Hewitt and Flett, 1991) and the problematic expression of anger (Hewitt et al., 2002). Socially, students high in SPP risk isolation due to defensiveness, hypersensitivity to criticism and proneness for social anxiety (Flett, Coulter and Hewitt, 2012; Roxborough et al., 2012), and score lower on teacher ratings of social functioning and leadership (Chan, 2007). The psychosomatic impact includes insomnia (Azevedo et al., 2010) and headaches (Kowal and Pritchard, 1990). Educationally, SPP correlates with school underachievement (Shaunessy, 2011), self-handicapping (Kearns, Forbes

and Gardiner, 2007), academic burnout (Saviz and Naeini, 2014), school refusal (Atkinson et al., 1989) and poorer life outcomes (Haring, Hewitt and Flett, 2003; Hewitt and Flett, 1991). *Perfectionism* more generally may result in lower efficiency and therefore performance, for example in a proof-reading task (Stoeber and Eysenck, 2008), which has clear implications for education.

Psychologically, *perfectionism* correlates highly with procrastination (Burnam et al., 2014), intrusive mental imagery (Lee et al., 2011), a passive coping approach (Chan, 2007) and the development and maintenance of a range of mental health problems (Morris and Lomax, 2014), perhaps explaining the role of SPP as a risk factor in suicidal ideation (Beevers and Miller, 2004) and suicide (Dahl, 2014; Donaldson, Spirito and Farnett, 2000; O'Connor, 2007). This is "particularly intense among academically high-achieving and gifted young people" (Bell et al., 2010; p.253), relevant for the current study. In their UK-based case study report, Bell and colleagues (2010) explored the role of *perfectionism* in completed HE male student suicides. Although case study methodology carries significant limitations for generalisability of findings, it may be the only approach possible, and provides a unique insight from families of students who died through suicide. In each account, problems were reportedly evident from mid-adolescence, supporting earlier, school-based intervention. A notable quotation comes from the case of an 18-year-old, who reportedly experienced getting the highest results in school as "emotionally exhausting, rather than gratifying" (Bell et al., 2010; p.257).

However, some authors suggest benefits of *perfectionism*; higher life satisfaction (Wang, Yuen and Slaney, 2009), *lower* depression levels (Afshar et al., 2011), enhanced performance (Lundh, 2004; Stoll, Lau and Stoeber, 2008) from healthy striving (Stoeber and Otto, 2006) and higher peer popularity than 'non-*perfectionists'* (Gilman, Adams and Nounopoulos, 2011). This belief presents a major challenge to addressing the maladaptive outcomes associated with *perfectionism*. For example, in a discussion of the vulnerabilities of 'gifted children', Roedell (1984) attributes great achievement to the driving energy of *perfectionism*. When considering motivation to change, this is significant; a perceived benefit of the current state is likely to act as a barrier to change, despite the presence of adverse consequences, particularly if the perceived benefit is in an area of particular value to the individual. This is explored later.

The current study follows those who argue that *all* forms of *perfectionism* are unhealthy in the long-term (Flett and Hewitt, 2014; Shih, 2012), since no significant associations have been found between academic achievement and SPP in a range of Canadian studies (Flett, Blankstein and Hewitt, 2009; Stornelli, Flett and Hewitt, 2009) but instead a reduction in emotional wellbeing. Shaunessy (2011) found only a moderate correlation between 'adaptive *perfectionism'* and academic achievement, though a link with greater life satisfaction, which had a strong inverse relationship with 'maladaptive *perfectionism'*. As discussed earlier, it may be helpful and less confusing to re-conceptualise the above positive outcomes as resulting from 'optimalism', not *perfectionism*, to distinguish healthy from unhealthy achievement and conscientiousness from neuroticism. Since the study's definition of *perfectionism*

includes ‘adverse consequences’, the key element is that ‘optimalists’ can succeed *and* maintain emotional wellbeing.

Risk and protective factors. Recent research explores factors which contribute to or protect from the negative effects of *perfectionism*; important when considering school guidance so appropriate, proactive support can be provided to those most at risk. Again, due to the correlational nature of studies, their relatively small, non-UK, university samples, and the limitations of retrospective research and self-rating scales, associations must be interpreted cautiously.

Various factors appear to play an important role in mediating *perfectionism*, for example self-worth (DiBartolo et al., 2004; DiBartolo, Yen and Frost, 2008), self-efficacy (Chan, 2007), self-esteem (Zhang and Cai, 2012), self-control (Achtziger and Bayer, 2013), resilience (Klibert et al., 2014) and locus of control (Arazzini and De George-Walker, 2014). Specific coping resources are suggested to alleviate the more harmful effects of stress among *perfectionist* adolescents (Nounopoulos, Ashby and Gilman, 2006), with competence and capabilities also playing a role (Stornelli, Flett and Hewitt, 2009), but requiring more exploration.

The influence of gender is debated (e.g. Clark and Coker, 2009; Rice, Kubal and Preusser, 2004). For example, Jaradat (2013) suggested girls are significantly more *perfectionist* than boys, but some studies find no gender differences (e.g. Rice et al., 2007; Thorpe and Nettelbeck, 2014). This is of particular relevance in a study by van

Hanswijck de Jonge and Waller (2003) which uniquely explored both gender and race in relation to different types of *perfectionism* in adolescents. In their large sample, these authors found higher levels of SOP and OOP in both male and female African-American adolescents than their Caucasian peers, though no difference between participant groups (either race or gender) in SPP. Cultural explanations were offered but may not be applicable within UK schools, and require more substantial evidence, for example through an interpretivist approach to understand individual views within gender and race participant groups.

When considering developmental cognitive and social factors, it is likely that age contributes to how SPP manifests, however the literature lacks this dimension. Affluence has been explored as a risk factor in American youth, and is thought to interact with 'academic-giftedness' to contribute to the negative effects of *perfectionism* (Coren and Luthar, 2014; Lyman and Luthar, 2014), although a non-approving home environment is likely to play a role here (Greenspon, 2000). Several researchers highlight protective home variables, such as direct expression of expectations, encouragement and a nurturing, cohesive family (DiPrima et al., 2011; Morris and Lomax, 2014), suggesting tangible areas for intervention.

A critical review of research on the role of schools and the attitudes of school staff and parents in supporting students high in *perfectionism*. Schools are the primary source of mental health treatment for young people (DeSocio and Hootman, 2004) and appear natural places for interventions (Cheney et al., 2014; Flett and Hewitt, 2014) since teachers spend a large amount of time with young

people (Brown, 1999), and have access to specialist resources, so are in a good position to provide support throughout the school day. Despite *perfectionism's* strong familial etiology, school has an important environmental role to play in portraying healthy beliefs about achievement and striving, and proactively challenging unhelpful cognitions regarding acceptance and self-worth (Silverman, 1997), which may lead to performance-hindering anxiety (Greenspon, 2000). Morris and Lomax (2014) suggest monitoring the discrepancy between high-achieving students' aspirations and their performance, since 'dysfunctional *perfectionism'* and distress may result from higher discrepancy (Accordino, Accordino and Slaney, 2000). However, encouraging 'realistic' expectations may threaten the culture of aspirational secondary schools.

Since a major risk factor for *perfectionist* students is their reluctance to seek help when needed, Flett and Hewitt (2014) argue schools need a proactive approach to ensure they are meeting the needs of vulnerable students, for example conveying the message that seeking help is not a weakness, and being extremely alert to students who appear to be doing exceptionally well in ways that seem incongruous with prevailing stressors and challenges. Their 'ideal prevention program' involving schools lowering standards is likely to meet resistance in the current, 'outcomes-driven' educational climate, however their suggestion of engaging parents in interventions supports the current family-centred approach of the SEND reforms (DfE, 2014).

This ecosystemic approach is congruent with Greenspon's (2000) notion that *perfectionism* is intersubjective and "arises out of the interaction between the worlds of experience of two or more people" (p.207), rather than the motivation coming from entirely within the student. However, despite a thorough critique, his declaration that "*perfectionism* does not determine success; talent and energy do" (p.202) may be only partly helpful. Schools promoting a 'growth mindset' can advocate 'energy' in the form of effort and practice, but the notion of 'talent' implies a 'fixed mindset' and innate ability, which may reinforce unhelpful cognitions. The idea of encouraging a 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2006), a 'positive mindset' (McVey et al., 2004) and even a 'good-enough mindset' (Chan, 2012) within the school culture to help students cope with 'negative *perfectionism'* has been explored, although predominantly amongst overseas high-achieving students and requiring thorough embedding into the curriculum to be effective (e.g. Boaler, 2013). The notion, however, that *perfectionism* could be reinforced by the adults around the student receives some support from the work of Boone and colleagues (2012), who asserted that 'state' *perfectionism* can be induced in UK university students irrespective of their levels of 'trait' *perfectionism*. The effects could be even more pronounced for younger participants who are arguably more impressionable due to their developmental stage.

Guerra and Bradshaw (2008) highlighted 'core competencies' they felt were beneficial for promoting the wellbeing of *perfectionistic* young people; a positive sense of self, self-control, decision-making skills, a moral system of belief and prosocial connectedness. The Oxford High School for Girls recently ran a CBT-based campaign, "Goodbye Little Miss. Perfect" using work by Shafran, Egan and

Wade (2010), to proactively address school-based pressures and promote self-compassion as a substitute for self-criticism. Although not formally evaluated, this offers a starting point for school-based approaches. Damian and colleagues (2014) argue that teachers need to be more aware of students' *perfectionism* since it contributes not only to distress, but also to achievement goals. Although Romanian and using a cross-sectional correlational design, the large sample of secondary school students is a strength of this study and encourages reflection on how aware UK teachers are of *perfectionism*. It also reflects the link with performance-avoidance rather than performance-approach motivation and the risk of resultant underachievement.

Considering emotional wellbeing more generally, a public opinion poll revealed more than half of adults lack the confidence to approach a child if they suspect they have a mental health problem in case they are mistaken (Snaith, 2015). Although not specifically teachers, this highlights a societal issue that may be reflected amongst some education staff which perhaps requires addressing through ITT programmes and CPD, for example 'cinematherapy' may be a useful medium for training teachers to work with *perfectionistic* gifted students (Nugent and Shaunessy, 2010), though little evidence exists of the inclusion of *perfectionism* in teacher training. This perhaps reflects a lack of awareness of the potential negative impact of *perfectionism* and thus no perceived need, or perhaps highlights the already full timetable of topics of which teachers are expected to be aware. It may also be that teachers respond to the challenge of *perfectionism* in students using their own professional judgement, as demonstrated in an American social constructivist study by Park and Oliver (2009). However with only three participants and based on gifted

Science students, this requires further exploration to identify the short- and long-term effectiveness of existing strategies and applications to the UK. Thinking psychodynamically, it is likely that teachers' own levels and experiences of *perfectionism* will affect their attitudes towards *perfectionist* students, however literature relates to the link between teacher *perfectionism* and professional achievement (Fusun and Cemrenur, 2014) and burnout (Comerchero, 2008), rather than how it affects their teaching practice on a relational level.

The understanding and awareness of parents about *perfectionism* is also unknown. Their attitudes are also likely to be influenced by their own levels and experiences of *perfectionism*, and considering the parenting research are likely to have a powerful impact on their children. What is more readily available is the knowledge and understanding of parents regarding emotional wellbeing more generally, which highlights a high level of concern. For example, research by Action for Children suggests that UK parents, particularly mothers, are more likely to worry about their children's emotional wellbeing than any other health issue (Burns, 2015), and a recent survey by Young Minds found two thirds of parents felt there is a lack of resources available to support young people with mental health problems (BBC News, 2015). However, a Place2Be survey found almost a third of parents of children aged 5-18 admit they would feel embarrassed if their child wanted counselling in school, and one in five would not encourage their child to take this up, even if they asked for it (Snaith, 2015). This represents a substantial barrier to support for young people and the persistence of stigma around mental health concerns. The current research aims to emulate studies which have taken into account teacher and parent perspectives to provide helpful ideas for bioecological

prevention and intervention strategies (e.g. Clarke et al., 2013; Compton, Campbell and Mergler, 2014; Peterson et al., 2011; Power et al., 2010).

A critical review of literature on *perfectionism* interventions and the role of Educational Psychologists in supporting schools with such interventions. It is perhaps notable that in their review of the childhood *perfectionism* literature, Morris and Lomax (2014) identified 84 eligible studies regarding psychopathology, but only 7 regarding treatment, highlighting the current state of the field. *Perfectionism* treatment literature on the whole but particularly involving UK children lacks quality empirical evaluation (Arpen-Cribbie et al., 2008) of both process and outcomes (Kutlesa and Arthur, 2008), based perhaps upon the research limitations discussed earlier. Given the costs associated with *perfectionism*-related mental health concerns, there is reason to explore early intervention to develop effective prevention programmes. Tackling the root causes of problems supports the current political climate, ensuring public services remain sustainable in the long-term (Burns, 2015), and may also support the Government agenda to reduce suicides. I will now critically explore the minimal research into approaches to overcoming childhood *perfectionism* and the potential role for the EP.

Psychoeducation. Psychoeducation is:

> a therapeutic approach…for teaching clients the psychological self-help that will make their lives more fulfilling (Authier, 1977; p.15).

This intervention includes increasing understanding of problematic thinking and behaving. Flett and Hewitt (2014) suggest raising awareness of *perfectionism*

amongst students could help them share their experiences and concerns without fear of judgement. ‘Bibliotherapy’ and cartoons effectively engaged younger students and increased their comprehension about *perfectionism* in a small, non-UK study (Zousel, Rule and Logan, 2013). However, psychoeducation alone was ineffective in reducing *perfectionism* in a clinical adult sample (Steele et al., 2013), indicating that guidance should encourage action through the setting of goals and skills-development, rather than simply raise awareness in order to be truly empowering. Arpin-Cribbie and colleagues (2008) offered a promising account of a web-based psychoeducational intervention, incorporating general stress management and cognitive-behavioural principles for Canadian university students. This is supported by recent news highlighting the usefulness of digital technology for delivering mental health support to young people (Triggle, 2015), but must be considered carefully since SPP in particular is associated with problematic use of internet communicative services (Casale et al., 2014).

CBT. This approach is popular in the literature for helping individuals recognise irrational thinking about personal standards and mistake-making, encouraging more realistic expectations of themselves and finding alternative ways to approach situations. CBT is suggested to successfully reduce *perfectionism* if specifically targeted (Egan et al., 2014; Pleva and Wade, 2007) rather than as part of a general programme (Coughlin and Kalodner, 2006) or in addition to treating other issues (Essau et al., 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; McVey et al., 2004; Mitchell et al., 2013; Nobel, Manassis and Wilansky-Traynor, 2012). Face-to-face or guided self-help are suggested to be more effective than pure online self-help (Egan et al., 2014) for university students, and a group treatment modality receives some support

amongst overseas adult clinical (Steele et al., 2013) and non-clinical university samples (Kearns, Forbes and Gardiner, 2007; Kutlesa and Arthur, 2008). Sampling is often problematic in such studies; non-clinical volunteers are likely to be high in motivation to change and unrepresentative of those students who are reluctant to ask for help for fear of being exposed (Onwuegbuzie and Daley, 1999), and studies often do not specifically target SPP. It is also unknown whether such approaches would work with younger participants, although there is increasing evidence to suggest CBT approaches in general may be beneficial for school students, for example being increasingly employed by EPs in their work with young people to improve behaviour (e.g. Greig and Mackay, 2013; Squires, 2001), even with primary age children (O'Callaghan and Cunningham, 2015). However I disagree with O'Callaghan and Cunningham's (2015) argument that employing CBT approaches may be a resourceful way for contemporary EP services to meet school need, since running a CBT-based intervention is likely to be time-consuming and does not promote environmental change, which may ultimately benefit a greater number of students. In agreement with Menzies (2014), more is needed than solely expecting change from the young person. The effectiveness of CBT is also questionable, since the above studies have significant limitations including small sample size, and the evidence-base remains scarce, particularly for *perfectionism*. However, at least two UK EP training courses (Squires and Dunsmuir, 2011) include CBT approaches in their TEP training, suggesting its inclusion in the EP 'toolkit', and considering the cognitive hypothesis, may have use with *perfectionism*.

Other therapeutic approaches. In their recent systematic review and meta-analysis of the adult psychiatric treatment literature, UK-based researchers Lloyd

and colleagues (2015) positively concluded that psychological interventions *can* reduce *perfectionism* and associated difficulties. Amongst children exhibiting *perfectionism*, narrative and creative play therapy techniques employing high liaison between parents and teachers receive support (Ashby, Kottman and Martin, 2004; Daigneault, 1999), however these studies lack outcome measures and utilise case study design. Other forms of psychotherapy suggested to significantly reduce *perfectionism* may offer potential frameworks for further investigation with larger UK-based samples, particularly focusing on students and SPP (e.g. acceptance and commitment therapy, ACT; Szymanski, 2011; 'quality of life therapy'; Padash, Moradi and Saadat, 2014; 'coherence therapy'; Rice, Neimeyer and Taylor, 2011; 'cognitive remediation therapy'; Whitney, Easter and Tchnturia, 2008; and a cognitive pastoral approach employing narcissistic personality disorder strategies; Pembroke, 2012). In particular, ACT may be utilised in schools to improve psychological flexibility, as described by Bowden and Bowden (2012) for a range of issues in Australian schools. This approach utilises visual metaphor to encourage recognition of the bigger picture, and accepting suffering as a natural part of life, which could have benefits for students high in *perfectionism*.

When considering *perfectionism* as a complex product of genes, upbringing, experiences and personality, potential may come from the 'third wave' of psychotherapies, receiving non-UK support for opening up treatment possibilities for particularly challenging 'conditions' such as borderline personality disorder (BPD), chronic depression and generalised anxiety disorder (GAD; Kahl, Winter and Schweiger, 2012). For example, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), multimodal therapy (MMT), metacognitive therapy, schema therapy or dialectical

behaviour therapy (DBT) specifically focusing on *perfectionist* thoughts, feelings and behaviours could help reduce the 'adverse consequences' of this cognitive style. There is, as with CBT, support for these approaches for young people with conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Woidneck, Morrison and Twohig, 2014), depression (Ames et al., 2014; Hayes, Boyd and Sewell, 2011), OCD (Simons, Schneider and Herpertz-Dahlmann, 2006), anxiety and stress (Livheim et al., 2015), all of which have links with *perfectionism* (e.g. Hewitt et al., 2014; Martinelli et al., 2014; Olson and Kwon, 2015; Shikatani et al., 2015; Wiltgen et al., 2015) and hence may be effective. The psychological process of mindfulness as a therapeutic approach may have particular value in drawing the attention of students high in *perfectionism* to both their internal and external present experiences, allowing perhaps a more realistic and compassionate outlook as they begin to recognise and challenge their assumptions and beliefs in the light of evidence, and accept any challenging feelings. Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to be effective in the reduction of rumination and worry, stress, anxiety and depression in a systematic review and meta-analysis (Gu and colleagues, 2015) and a Swedish study found them to be strongly correlated with wellbeing (Branstrom, Duncan and Moskowitz, 2011). Notably, mindfulness approaches have been successfully used within drug addiction treatment (Chiesa, 2014). The link between addiction and *perfectionism* is explored more later.

Curriculum approaches. Following a thorough review of the treatment literature, Flett and Hewitt (2008) argue for a universal school-based, proactive intervention to build competencies such as enhancing resilience, coping and self-regulation and reduce levels of *perfectionism* by addressing students' sense of

responsibility and self-criticism (Flett and Hewitt, 2014). A systemic approach is advocated by Adelson and Wilson (2009) in their accessible resource book, which despite a number of appropriate criticisms by Foster (2011), offers practical strategies for American homes and schools and is rooted in educational psychology. Another American resource, although based on 'gifted' students, is Nugent's (2000) paper offering practical ideas for improving coping skills at a universal level, including bibliotherapy, art activities and group therapeutic discussion, though recognises that despite a unique opportunity to "help *perfectionistic* students reshape their way of thinking" (p.216), teachers are not trained counsellors. EPs can perhaps offer a supervisory role here, as with ELSAs and CBT-based approaches (Greig and Mackay, 2013). Mofield and Chakraborti-Ghosh (2010) agree coping skills should be universally improved before a targeted affective curriculum is developed for *perfectionist* students, since the *perfectionism* may simply be a sign the student is experiencing difficulty coping. These authors highlight the impact of classroom culture and parent involvement, although also focus on 'gifted' students. Using a case study design, Rimm's (2007) long-term American study argues both a systemic and individual approach are required, supporting the current research.

Role of the EP. Guidance here may be taken from overseas work due to the lack of literature on UK EP involvement. For example, DiPrima and colleagues (2011) suggest 'school psychologists' should engage parental involvement, and assess the maladaptiveness of students' *perfectionism* through behavioural observations and interviews. EPs could utilise skills in eliciting personal constructs to identify motivations for behaviour, supporting Neumeister's (2004) assertion that identifying students' motives is crucial for helping their wellbeing. Although highly

passionate in places and based on case studies, Greenspon (2014) highlights the potential and limitations of the role of 'school psychologists' in launching and supporting a process of 'recovery' for *perfectionists* involving both home and school. This suggests a therapeutic role for EPs, reflecting ongoing discussions about UK EPs becoming more generic child psychologists (MacKay, 2006), utilising their skills in working with families. A dissertation by Matlon (2014) explored the relationship between *perfectionism* and burnout in licensed clinical psychologists, but it is not yet known what effect *perfectionism* in EPs may have on their practice, particularly if working with young people also high in *perfectionism*. EPs should be mindful of transference and countertransference within any therapeutic relationship, and keep an attitude of 'realistic optimism' (Ehrenreich, 2009).

The EP may also have a valuable role to play in delivering training to schools and families on internalising disorders linked to *perfectionism*, and SPP in particular (DeSocio and Hootman, 2004; Weist et al., 2007), so that warning signs are less likely to be missed, particularly amongst high-achieving and well-attending students who may be overlooked. The EP may help determine which staff are best suited to support vulnerable students through appropriately identifying employee skills and expertise (Allison et al., 2014), then offering supervision, for example through ELSA supervision groups or individual consultation sessions. With the government looking increasingly to education settings to assist in meeting the mental health needs of young people, with the benefit that they are familiar and ideally non-stigmatising settings for the young people (Jordans et al., 2010), the EP can be a valuable resource in supporting this.

2.3 Gaps in the literature

The literature review suggests *perfectionism* is a challenging area to research due to a lack of consensus on its nature and difficulties accurately identifying the target population. The scale of the problem is unclear, particularly within a UK secondary-school context, but my understanding from the literature is that SPP in particular has strong links with psychopathology, including suicide, and although psychological interventions may be helpful, it becomes more difficult to change over time. The implication, therefore, is early intervention. The lack of research into awareness and interventions in UK schools is a significant concern since this is a potentially vulnerable group with whom EPs could make a difference, particularly since, if they are predominantly well-behaved, high-achieving students, they are unlikely to meet thresholds for working with other professional services. The current study therefore provides an exploratory basis for further UK work by extending knowledge within the area regarding the construct of *perfectionism* in UK high-achieving schools. There is also a need for research into the role of EPs, considering the current political agenda for school-based mental health support.

Participatory action research. The current study is highly original in applying participatory action research to the field of *perfectionism*. This approach to research can be considered as:

> systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting change (Green et al., 2003; p.419).

Participants can therefore be considered ‘co-researchers’, participating in research for their own benefit. Bergold and Thomas (2012) describe the participatory research process as enabling co-researchers to:

> step back cognitively from familiar routines, forms of interaction, and power relationships in order to fundamentally question and rethink established interpretations of situations and strategies (online).

The goals of participatory action research are therefore for co-researchers to create knowledge, produce consciousness and thereby answer "questions of their daily struggle and survival" (Tandon, 1988; p.7). There is an important sense of community within this approach, as individuals are considered 'co-researchers' making changes to improve their current conditions which will ultimately affect the wider community. The key principles of community-based and participatory action research have been described by Israel and colleagues (1998) following extensive analysis of the literature. This was based on the field of public health, so arguably has relevance for the current area if it is assumed that *perfectionism* has important links with problematic health outcomes. Although not definitive, the following principles form a useful basis for conceptualising the current study:

1. Although geographically dispersed, members of a community hold a sense of **common identity** and shared fate. The community in the current study is considered to be students, parents and teachers at four high-achieving UK schools. On another level, the community of interest within (and beyond) this is those students high in *perfectionism* attending these schools.

2. Existing **strengths and resources** within the community are explicitly identified and built upon. Participants in the study are considered to have a wealth of resources to enable them to offer helpful support to students high in *perfectionism*.

3. **Collaboration** is facilitated in *all* phases of the research where community members choose to participate. The focus is on issues identified by the community and ensuring members can truly influence the entire research process. Students,

parents and teachers will be directly and indirectly involved in the creation of guidance and their own change process.

4. **Knowledge and action** are integrated to mutually benefit all involved. The research process itself acts in favour of social change regarding attitudes towards students high in *perfectionism*, but also leaves participants with a concrete resource based on the research with which to continue to apply the results to a social change effort.

5. Inherent inequalities between marginalised communities and researchers are recognised and addressed by emphasising the knowledge of community members and sharing information, resources and **decision-making power**. Students, parents and teachers are 'heard' for the first time regarding their unique attitudes and beliefs about *perfectionism*, and a co-learning process created in which I, as a researcher, learn from the knowledge and local theories of the community members, and the community members acquire skills in conducting research.

6. The research involves trusting partnership at all points within a **cyclical and iterative** process. The development of the guidance is dependent on truly collaborative involvement of the community members.

7. Knowledge gained is disseminated in a **respectful and understandable** way to all participants, acknowledging their contributions and ownership of the knowledge production. The guidance is shared thoughtfully with the further option for participants to read the completed research.

In practice, the convergence of science and practice perspectives is a demanding process (Bergold and Thomas, 2012), not least of which is the likely lack of competencies of the selected community to participate equally in the research

process and the time-bound nature of the particular research which did not allow the opportunity to train participants in research methods, as advocated by von Unger (2012). Deciding to take a participatory action research approach therefore does not guarantee truly collaborative research activities. The nature and degree of participation in the research process is an important element of PAR in order to challenge the powerful institution of research; the question to be asked is, "who has control of the research?" It is wise to consider the issue of 'power' here. PAR explicitly attempts to:

> enable the oppressed groups and classes to acquire sufficient creative and transforming leverage as expressed in specific projects, acts and struggles (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; p.4).

The notion of an 'oppressed group' is of interest within the current study. Oppression is the use of power to privilege a group at the expense of marginalising or silencing another. Further, 'institutional oppression' is the established practices which systemically reflect and produce inequities based on membership in particular social identity groups. It is important to note that institutions, whether the research world or individual schools, can be considered oppressive whether or not there exist oppressive intentions. The voice of students, parents and teachers of high-achieving schools within the field of *perfectionism* is as yet unheard, so in the sense of 'research' as a powerful institution, these community members could be considered an oppressed group. More specifically, those students high in *perfectionism* could be considered an 'oppressed group', since the existing literature would suggest that they may be both vulnerable and 'invisible' to the powerful institution of school leaders. They are also reasonably invisible within *perfectionism* research and are therefore perhaps doubly 'oppressed'. However, the research aims evolved from my analysis of the existing literature, rather than emerging in a truly democratic way from the participants themselves. So too did the design and analysis of interviews.

This is explored in the Discussion. A particular concern with PAR is that, although it aims to 'enlighten and awaken common people' (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991), the marginalised community on which the study focuses is actually very challenging to reach; the likelihood of them initiating such a project themselves or having the free choice to participate in the research is slim. This perpetuates the powerful institution of science researching *about* the people in question and their problems, rather than *with* these people, as described by Russo (2012) for mental health research. Again this is explored later as it has importance for the current study. The creation of a "safe space" (Bergold and Thomas, 2012) is imperative to allow participants to disclose personal views, moving from a position of distrust and detachment to self-assurance and a feeling of belonging through having their standpoint as co-researcher taken seriously. The capacity of myself as a stranger to achieve this when carrying out interviews in the institutional setting of school is debatable. Again this is discussed later.

Notable criticisms of the PAR approach include the lack of testable hypotheses and late emergence of research questions. Within the current study there has been a balance attempted by basing the progression of the research on the existing literature in conjunction with emerging themes from participants, perhaps weakening the truly collaborative nature. Another criticism of PAR is the entanglement of the academic researcher with the research partners, meaning my own contributions to the collected data cannot be separated from the participants'. As such, PAR is not considered objective, reliable or valid, therefore suffers resistance to funding in the science sector (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). It is perhaps for this reason that more qualitative, interpretivist research is so sparse in the field, along with the time-

consuming nature of true PAR. In agreement with Westmeyer (2000), 'quality' is a socially defined concept and from my perspective, the benefits of PAR outweigh the criticisms.

The current study. This study explored student, parent and staff knowledge and understanding regarding the following issues:

- What is a *perfectionist*?
- What causes and maintains *perfectionism*?
- What are the risks and benefits of *perfectionism*?
- Can *perfectionists* change? (Should they?)
- What could help them change? (What would not?)

To a lesser extent, the paper also explored whether the identification of *perfectionism* correlated between participants and my own interpretations as a researcher, with a view to tentatively providing schools and EPs with a helpful tool for identifying those students for whom *perfectionism* may be problematic. There was also the opportunity to observe the correlation between parent and child in terms of *perfectionism*, and to tentatively explore similarities and differences in the views of students, parents and staff, between types of school and gender. Appendix C provides a summary of the information used for the purposes of identifying gaps and potential issues in participants' beliefs, knowledge and understanding.

3 Design and Methods

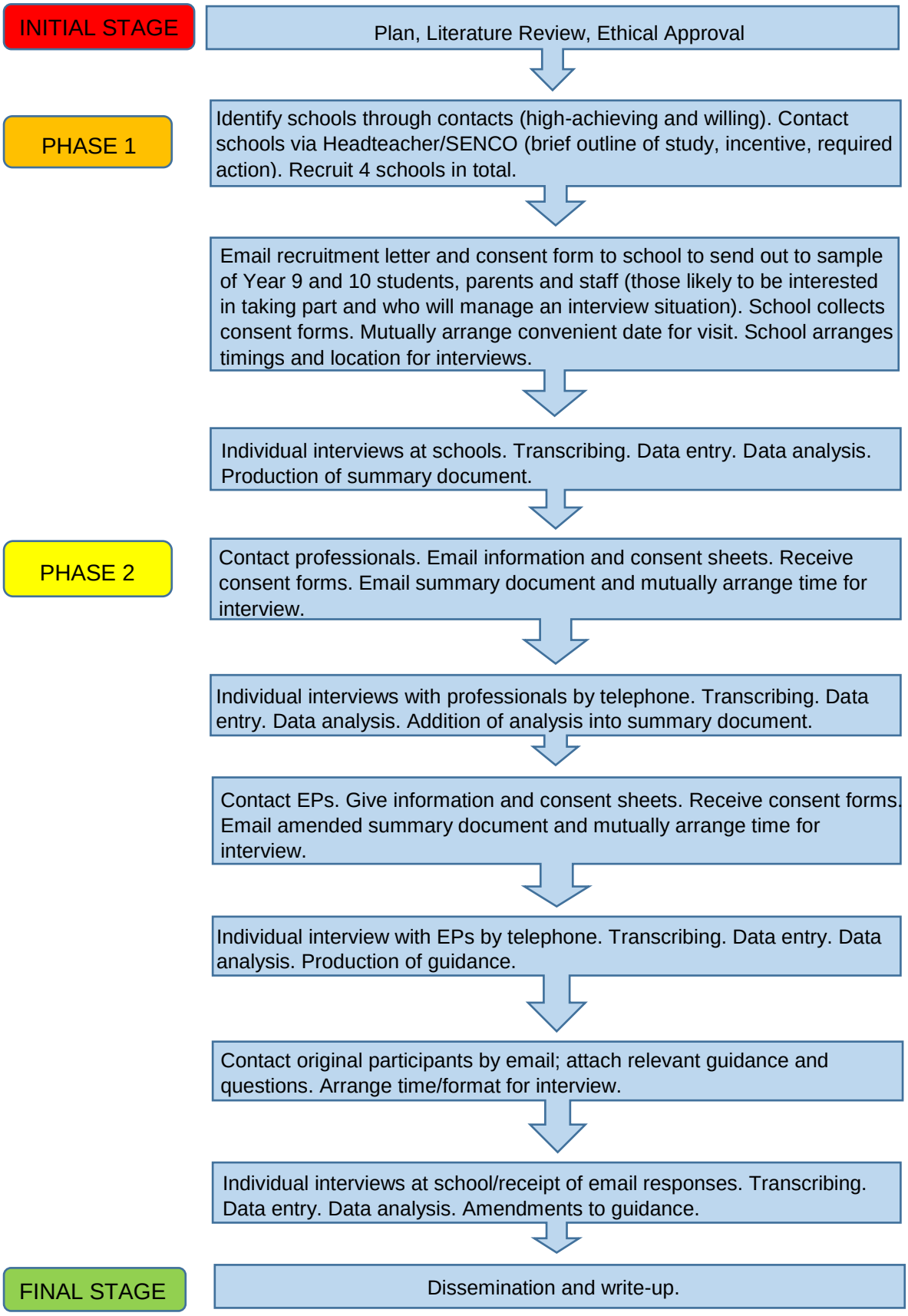

Figure 2. Diagram of actions

3.1 Methodology

The overall paradigm for the current study is critical emancipatory, providing a 'voice' to a potentially vulnerable and under-recognised group within schools, and also to a previously unheard sector of the community in *perfectionism* research; school students, parents and school staff. Through critical emancipation's possibilities for social transformation (Lather, 1991) there is an explicit ideology of improving the emotional wellbeing of students high in *perfectionism* by raising awareness and understanding amongst key individuals and prompting the use of helpful strategies to support such students. This is grounded in Humphries' (1997) description of the ultimate purpose or legitimate goal of research being the emancipation of mankind.

The emancipatory approach allows for a balance between the dynamic of 'oppressed' groups and powerful institutions and has generated successful research within the diverse areas of class, race, gender, sexuality and disability. Within this research the emancipation relates to those students at risk of mental health issues due to high *perfectionism*, and the high-achieving schools and family systems in which they reside. This approach supports my beliefs, arisen through personal and professional experiences, about the inequalities inherent in power differentials and the potential for institutions such as schools to either help or hinder students' global development. As EPs we have the opportunity *and* responsibility to use our skills to address such inequalities, in part through using our influential position within the systems around the student to provide a voice to those currently unheard. In discussion of critical psychology ('what it is and what it is not'), Ian Parker (2007) describes the need to examine the ways in which psychologists produce models and

subsequently practice in order to reflect upon the power of these to limit rather than promote change. This is pertinent to the current study as my attempts to understand processes and promote positive change through encouraging different linguistic resources, social practices and representations of the self (Parker, 2007), of course, therefore, may produce limits of which I may not currently be aware, not least of which is the lack of control over others' interpretation of my understanding. This has the potential to reinforce rather than challenge power imbalances and is discussed more later.

The research is both theory and needs driven. Phase One interprets the perspectives of students, parents and staff within a framework of existing theories on *perfectionism*. Phase Two applies theoretical principles from the literature to meet the needs of the participants, acknowledging the limits of generalisation to students, parents and teachers outside of the study. The goal was not to achieve an accurate representation of reality, as would be sought through more positivist-influenced research. Instead, the approach to 'knowing' is one which avoids subordination and assumptions about the nature of knowledge, instead seeking to deconstruct and displace normalisation and 'social engineering' to create increased levels of knowing (Lather, 1991). Following this approach, the ontological perspective within the paradigm is interpretivist, recognising the many versions of reality and therefore multiple interpretations of *perfectionism*, in contrast with existing literature which makes assumptions about *perfectionism's* quantifiability and universality, despite multiple definitions. The current study therefore promotes rich data by recognising individual meaning attributed to language, the premise of which is that individual interpretation will determine behaviour and is therefore valuable in understanding the

attitudes, values, motivations and beliefs of students and the adults in their lives. This is pertinent for EP work which celebrates individual difference and seeks to understand the 'logical levels' for each person involved in order to find solutions to problem situations.

The epistemological perspective of the research is social constructionism. This is the view that:

> all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998; p.42).

Individuals seek understanding of the world and develop subjective meanings from that experience (Burr, 1995). The beliefs and understanding individuals hold about *perfectionism* and *perfectionists* in society will directly influence their actions, therefore contributing to the creation of a culture, which in turn influences the understanding and actions of others. This determines whether *perfectionistic* thoughts, feelings and behaviours are reinforced and maintained, or challenged and altered. Through the mediation of language and interpretation of social interaction, the current study explored the ways in which meaning of *perfectionism* is co-constructed within participants' contexts, using this knowledge to inform action.

Based on these philosophical assumptions, participatory action research (PAR) was selected as an appropriate approach. This has been utilised within mental health research (e.g. Weaver and Nicholls, 2001) and is considered an experiential form of learning that can legitimately influence practice (Kolb, 1984), with the ultimate aim of improving health and reducing health inequalities (Baum, MacDougall and Smith,

2006). Within the current study, data was collected in collaboration with participants to produce a shared understanding of the construct of *perfectionism* within the context of high-achieving schools, and the world understood through trying to change it and reflecting upon this process; this involved raising self-awareness, improving understanding and encouraging positive action on behalf of the communities involved. It also involved myself as researcher experiencing what was being studied and influencing the research, allowing feeling and reason to govern actions. This approach breaks down traditional hierarchical relationships between researchers and research participants; the latter are instead considered co-researchers (French and Swain, 1997) with the research being done 'with' not 'to' or 'on' them (Reason and Heron, 1986). This encourages genuine participation and ultimately positive change. The extent to which this was achieved in the current study is explored in the Discussion, with specific consideration of Parker's (2005) concerns around action research that the very institutional base of the work is to some extent a hindrance, and that the interpretations are saturated with theory.

3.2 Sampling and Participants.

This research took place across three local authorities in South-West and North-West England. Eight secondary schools were approached opportunistically, selection criteria being 'high-achieving' based on selective intake or consistently successful examination results and Ofsted grading of 'outstanding'. It was predicted from the literature that individuals associated with such schools may have valuable perspectives to offer the research, given the link between high achievement and *perfectionism.* Due to gender and school type also occurring in the literature, a

mixture of single-sex, co-educational, comprehensive, grammar, local authority, academy and independent schools were approached. Four schools agreed to take part, and assigned code names to preserve their anonymity. Four schools did not, stating concern for students missing out on study to participate, supporting the hypothesis that schools may fear addressing high-achievers' emotional wellbeing could threaten attainment. I also detected suspicion over the study's intentions and related defensiveness, prompting reflection upon their understanding of *perfectionism*.

Participating schools circulated a recruitment email to a select sample of Year 9 and 10 students, parents, and teachers (Appendix D), chosen in discussion with the school contact (Headteacher or special educational needs coordinator, SENCO) using the following criteria:

1. willing to participate in research about *perfectionism*

2. able to express themselves well in an interview situation.

The age groups were sampled purposively due to being able to reflect upon a range of school-related pressures (e.g. transitions, public examinations), being at a developmental level appropriate for communicating their thoughts and feelings insightfully, and also at the age at which most long-term mental health issues will have begun so they may be aware of students at risk in their year group. There was also a practical consideration that they would not be engaged in public examinations over the course of the research. All approached agreed to take part and all students were identified by school as 'high-achievers'. Schools also approximately rated the students for 'level' of *perfectionism* (low, medium, high, unsure) based on their

current understanding of the construct. Table 5 shows the demographics of the participating schools. Information about participants, including their chosen code names to provide further anonymity, can be seen in Tables 7 and 8 (Appendix E). Those participants who have a parent/child link will be demarcated in quotations with the following symbol: ^ (e.g. Joel^ denotes Joel is a parent of a student in the study. Grace^ denotes Grace is the child of a parent in the study). The exception to this is Charlie and Marie; since Marie was contributing to the study from the perspective of a teacher, not a parent, this link was disregarded for the current study.

Table 5

School demographics

Code name (location)	**School type**	**Participants**		
		Students	**Teachers**	**Parents**
Beech School (North-West England)	Boys' independent grammar school	6	2	2
Grey Willow School (South-West England)	Girls' local authority grammar school	6	1	4
Appletree Academy (South-West England)	Mixed comprehensive academy	2	1	1

Cedar High (South-West England)	Mixed comprehensive school	3	2	2
		17	**6**	**9**

To provide the study with inter-rater reliability as well as a multi-disciplinary perspective to provide new insights to the data, six healthcare professionals were recruited, along with three practising EPs with varied experience of producing research-based guidance for schools in different formats. Of these, 'John' had substantial experience producing published guidance for schools on loss and bereavement, and children in care; 'Jeremy' had some experience producing guidance for the local authority on anti-bullying and self-harm, and 'Simon' had no formal experience, instead drawing upon guidance provided through discussions and reports in his casework. Professionals were known to the researcher either personally or professionally and were based across six counties in England. Their demographic information, including their chosen code name to preserve their anonymity, can be seen in Table 8 (Appendix E). All professionals were selected on the basis that their diverse professional training and experiences could provide value to the production of guidance. The recruitment of health professionals was purposive to reflect the current psychopathology literature on *perfectionism*. The recruitment of practicing EPs was purposive to provide a counter-balance to this health world by offering an educational psychology perspective to help shape my understanding of the data and offer originality within this field. Individuals were approached by myself via conversation, e-mail or telephone and the nature of the research study was

discussed with them prior to e-mailing more formal information and consent sheets. All professionals approached agreed to take part.

3.3 Collection of Data

A qualitative research design was employed to generate a rich concept of the subjective views of participants, including uncovering process issues. This followed a dialectic approach in which constructs were compared and contrasted and an in-depth understanding gained of participants' views of *perfectionism*, contrasting with purely quantitative data which may offer limited conclusions and miss important nuances (French, Reardon and Smith, 2003). An attempt was made to view participants as co-researchers, entering fully into the process with me as researcher mindful of dynamics due to factors such as age, gender and status to ensure the research felt truly participatory and collaborative. However, the nature of the sampling and the design of the interview meant there existed unintentional power imbalance with the 'institutions' of research and school having the dominant role in the data collection. This compromise to the PAR approach is discussed later but it is for this reason that participants will not be referred to as 'co-researchers', as promoted by the PAR approach.

Each participant had one semi-structured interview in a quiet room within their school, lasting up to an hour, using PCP (Kelly, 1955) and hierarchical focused questioning combining open- and closed- questions. Keeping questions as open-ended as possible reduced the likelihood that participants felt prohibited or led towards a particular theoretical formulation or agenda. This semi-structured

interactive approach is an open and flexible research tool and "an illuminative process where truth is seen as both relative and contextually located" (Maxwell, 2006; p.21). The strength of PCP as an interpretive research technique is the exploration and elicitation of people's unique understanding (Ravenette, 1977), used successfully with both children (e.g. Maxwell, 2006) and adults (e.g. Coulling, 2000). Another strength is its power to transform in addition to eliciting attitudes, supporting the research aim to actively change participants' world in addition to understanding it. Projective techniques were also used as a data collection tool here to support the elicitation of constructs and co-production of knowledge, based upon their value in providing a 'safe' intermediary between researcher and participant in order to facilitate discussion where participants may otherwise feel inhibited. Interpreting participants' emotional needs based on their projections was not part of the study due to limited supporting evidence for this use. Interviews were recorded using digital hardware and stored securely on computer software.

Activities. Each phase involved multiple activities. For brevity, a brief summary is provided and further information can be found in Appendix F.

In Phase One, there were three activities for the students and parents, with teachers omitting the first activity. Although this resulted in differing interviews between these participant groups, this was a purposeful decision in order to generate richer data that would ultimately result in greater benefit to participants. Observations of teacher *perfectionism* were not relevant for this particular study, and also practically, a shorter interview time offered respectful consideration of the limited available time of

teachers which helped maintain a good working relationship with the schools involved in the research.

Students and parents first completed part of a dynamic assessment requiring them to draw a complex figure from memory (Figures 3 and 4, Appendix E). This was for a number of reasons; first, and participant-centred, it was expected to provide an initial 'relief' to the unfamiliar interview situation by externalising the focus onto a concrete activity. This was designed to help ease the participant into the interview experience and through praise and subsequent discussion, help to build rapport. Secondly, it allowed me to observe participants' reaction to a minor stress-inducing experience, providing some evidence with which to put their subsequent discussions into context and provisionally identify elements described in Table 4. Finally, it provided a concrete experience on which to base discussion of emergent themes of pride, stress and mistake-making. The dynamic element of this activity was omitted for time purposes following a pilot interview.

This was followed by a triadic elicitation activity involving the constructs of success and happiness, with emergent constructs recorded using a bipolar format (Figures 5,6 and 7, Appendix I), providing further discussion, including issues around the origins and changeability of these constructs and the purpose of school. This was the teachers' first activity. This introduction allowed the development of rapport and practice for participants in the style of interviewing to co-construct information. The term 'happiness' was used as it was deemed more accessible than 'emotional wellbeing', however it is acknowledged the two terms are not necessarily

interchangeable. It was therefore of benefit to clarify participant constructs for 'happiness'.

Next, all participants were asked for their current knowledge and understanding of the word *perfectionist* and 'not *perfectionist'*, facilitated through use of the 'Blob classroom' (Long and Wilson, 2009; Figure 5, Appendix E), pictures of typical school experiences (Figure 6, Appendix E) and pyramiding and laddering techniques. Bipolar constructs were recorded (Figures 8,9 and 10, Appendix I) and issues of origin and changeability again discussed, with opportunity for participants to reflect on their previous constructs around success and happiness. This loosely followed Tschudi's ABC Model (1977) in which important issues were uncovered by exploring A: what the person considers the opposite of *perfectionism* to be; B: what the person considers to be the disadvantages of *perfectionism* and the advantages of non-*perfectionism*; and C: what the person considers to be the disadvantages of non-*perfectionism* and advantages of *perfectionism*, or the 'implicative dilemma' (Hinkle, 1965), key in identifying what might stop *perfectionists* from changing.

Finally, participants were asked to mark on the line between *perfectionist* and 'not *perfectionist'* where they would place themselves and significant others; the teachers were asked to place their ideal student. Reflections on the discussions and process regarding shared understandings took place, and the next steps in the research clarified. Informal conversation was initiated once interviews ceased to be recorded, concluding with thanking participants for their time and helpful contributions to ensure they exited the research environment in a neutral or positive mood.

Participants were observed throughout the interview and my thoughts and feelings about both the process and the participant were noted in a reflexive journal immediately after each interview. Although the study's philosophical assumptions indicate the use of measurement scales for the construct of *perfectionism* is inappropriate (as there exist discrepancies in dimensions being assessed), for the current study an approximate 'rating' for young people and parents was desired in order to inform discussion. This was also considered helpful regarding 'optimalism' as a comparison. This was achieved through analysis of the above observations, interview data and elements described in Table 4. To provide some framework, yet knowingly created for the current study and based entirely on my judgement as a researcher-practitioner, the following criteria were used to gain an approximate 'rating' for both *perfectionism* and 'optimalism':

Table 9

Approximate perfectionism/'optimalism' ratings created for current study

Number of factors detected from Table 4	**Approximate 'rating'**
0-4	Low
5-9	Average
10-13	High

To further encourage authentic participation in the research, participants were sent an e-mail once their interview had been transcribed, inviting them to review their transcript and add any further comments.

Phase Two involved three distinct parts, all based upon the philosophies underpinning PAR and the involvement of participants in their own process of change:

1. Collaboration with other professionals,
2. Production of guidance,
3. Evaluating the guidance.

Appendix H shows an information sheet and consent form sent via e-mail to each external professional, followed by a document outlining the purposes of the study, a brief overview of the literature and narrative account of the data collected from students, parents and teachers in Phase One, summarised under broad themes. It concluded with a summary of the gaps and potential issues in participant beliefs interpreted from the data, and questions for the participants to consider. These potential issues were described as ‘misconceptions’ in the sense that the beliefs differed from the dominant discourses in the literature, and as such presented possible concerns based on what is currently known. The word ‘misconceptions’ was used for ease of explanation. It is acknowledged that, since individuals interpret their worlds differently and uniquely, including the use of language, the word ‘misconception’ implies there is one correct interpretation of reality over another. This is not intended to be the case. However with such little explored in this area, yet such a high risk of negative outcomes suggested, it was considered necessary for the current study to take as its basis the construction of *perfectionism* as given in Appendix C, and hence the use of the word ‘misconception’ is a crude practicality. It is for this reason that, similarly to *perfectionism*, the word *misconception* is in italics

throughout. It is acknowledged this introduces a more positivist perspective and this is explored later in the reflexive account of the research process.

Participants provided their answers either via e-mail, in a face-to-face discussion or over the telephone as suited their preferences. Following these responses, a final summary of gaps and *misconceptions* was produced, along with a synthesis of intervention ideas. An information sheet was then created using the gaps and *misconceptions*, and synthesis of intervention ideas, and sent via e-mail to each of the EP participants along with their information and consent sheets (Appendix H). Telephone interviews were then conducted with each of the EPs, lasting half an hour, using the questions on the information sheets as a basis for discussion. Elements of effective dissemination were incorporated into discussions, including awareness, support and favourability, understanding, involvement and commitment (Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning, 1997; p.30). This concluded the ‘collaboration with professionals’ section of the study.

To produce the guidance, the key information on *perfectionism* from the literature review was consulted alongside the gaps and *misconceptions* identified in Phase One, participant preferences for guidance, and feedback from the external professionals and EPs. Consideration was given to the assertion that successful dissemination strategies are those which:

> actively engage users and deliver what the users both want and need (FDTL, 1997; p.8).

An action plan was drawn up using a framework proposed by the FDTL (1997; p.27), with additional considerations of ‘cost’ and ‘criteria for success’, supporting the

current climate of reduced funding for services, and the need for a Plan-Do-Review cycle. The considerations and action plan can be found in Appendix L. A draft copy of guidance for supporting students high in *perfectionism* was produced through synthesising this information with artistic collaboration from two of the participants; Rebecca and Mary.

Finally, the guidance was evaluated by Phase One participants. All had expressed an interest in being involved further in the research and were contacted to ascertain continued interest. Respondents were provided a copy of the guidance relevant to their participant group, and given the option to discuss the guidance in person, over the telephone, or via e-mail (Appendix N). Of the original 32 participants, 29 took part in the follow-up evaluation (Appendix E). Adaptations were made to the guidance following discussions, and hardcopy final versions distributed to participants (Appendix M). This concluded the research.

Research Tools. The dynamic assessment images and 'Blob classroom' were on separate pieces of A5-size card. The scenarios were on A4 card. A 30-second sand timer, plain paper and a variety of drawing implements were provided, including an eraser and ruler. Small squares of plain paper were provided for the triadic elicitation tasks and three pre-prepared sheets for each participant were also required, with bipolar construct headings for successful/not successful, happy/not happy, and *perfectionist*/'not *perfectionist'*. Interviews were recorded on a laptop with voice recording hardware.

3.4 Analysis Procedures

Interviews were transcribed and this data entered into nVivo software. This was coded using an iterative approach, identifying emergent themes. A 6-stage deductive thematic analysis procedure following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used for each part of the research; in Phase One to analyse the conversations around *perfectionism*, and in Phase Two to analyse the professionals' views and participant evaluations of the guidance. Annotated thematic maps highlighting the journey from raw data to narrative findings for each of these processes can be found in Appendices J, K and O. Table 10 delineates this process.

Table 10

Analysis of qualitative data

Phase of analysis	**Actions undertaken**
1: data familiarisation	Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher (Phase One and Two) and e-mail responses anonymised and printed (Phase Two). This increased familiarity with the data and enabled early themes to be detected.
2: generating initial codes	Initial codes were produced at a semantic level, mirroring the questions asked at this stage, reflecting a theory- rather than data-driven approach in order to provide order to the mass of information. All data items were coded within nVivo software, allowing for inconsistencies to be analysed at a later stage. Initial

	themes in Phase One were 'what it is', 'what it isn't', and 'personal perception'. Initial themes in the professionals part of Phase Two were 'perspective on the data', 'interventions' and 'EP role', with an additional theme of 'dissemination' for the EPs. Initial themes in the evaluation part of Phase Two were 'overall opinion', 'raising of awareness', and 'predicted effectiveness'.
3: searching for themes	A thematic map was created to demonstrate overarching themes and the relations between different themes and levels of themes.
4: reviewing themes	Themes were revised to ensure the data supported them, there was cohesion within and clear distinction between themes. Any themes not meeting these criteria were reworked or discarded from analysis. Once the candidate themes adequately matched the data, a revised thematic map was created. This map was checked to ascertain it fitted the data set.
5: defining and naming themes	The themes were further refined and defined to capture an aspect of the data. A detailed analysis was then conducted for each theme, identifying interesting components of each set of data.
6: producing the report	An analytical narrative was written for each theme to provide a compelling argument to support the research questions. This is in the Findings chapter.

Quantitative data was entered into SPSS software and descriptive statistics performed. This data included gender, role, *perfectionism* ratings (low, medium, high; by researcher, self and school) and answers to closed questions. Pearson

correlations were performed between ratings of *perfectionism*. Frequencies were obtained for participant responses around success and happiness with *perfectionism*. These analyses can be found in Appendix J. The literature review and above analyses contributed to the production of guidance.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics are the moral principles guiding research from its inception through to completion and publication of results (BPS, 2010; p.5) and are the responsibility of the researcher. This section applies the four ethical principles set out in the 'Code of Human Research Ethics' (BPS, 2010) to the current study. The ethical approval certificate can be seen in Appendix G.

Respect for the Autonomy and Dignity of Persons.

> Researchers should respect the rights and dignity of participants in their research and the legitimate interests of stakeholders such as funders, institutions, sponsors and society at large (BPS, 2010; p.4).

The critical emancipatory approach of the current research actively respects the rights and dignity of participants through providing them with a voice, while acknowledging the inherent power imbalance within a research relationship. Following a PAR approach meant participants were viewed as autonomous and active in contributing data to the research. This is based strongly in ethical values which 'respect the knowledge, insight, experience and expertise of participants' (BPS, 2010; p.8). To avoid unfair, prejudiced, or discriminatory practice, participants were selected with consideration for differences in role, age group, race, gender and socio-economic setting. The rights and dignity of participants was also ensured

through ensuring consent was fully and clearly informed and renewed for Phase Two; including parental consent for each student. This included making participants aware of their right to leave the process at any point, without penalty, and that they were not obliged to answer anything that made them uncomfortable. This helped to minimise the power differentials to encourage mutual respect and trust between myself and participants, and additionally reinforced principles of self-determination, also facilitated by the provision of an alternative contact for any concerns.

Creating a pseudonym and reassurances about confidentiality and secure storage of data helped protect participants' privacy and confidence in the process. Where participants contributed artwork to the guidance and wished to have their identity linked with this, their clear, unambiguous informed consent was sought to respect their wishes and care was taken to ensure their identification did not jeopardise the identification of other participants. Giving participants the opportunity to reflect upon their emergent constructs within the recorded interview, asking how they had found the interview process upon completion and through follow-up interviews which prompted positive reflections on the research involvement as a whole contributed valuable information about the ethical strength of the study.

Producing guidance that could be freely accessed by any members of school or family demonstrates ethics for other stakeholders, including society at large, since the emotional and financial impact of *perfectionism* could potentially affect parents, other relatives, friends, colleagues, outside services and the wider community. The guidance ultimately pursued the interests of all stakeholders through promoting both

emotional wellbeing and achievement. The rights and dignity of institutions was maintained through ensuring anonymity for participating schools, providing them with a helpful resource and giving them the option to read the completed research.

Scientific Value. The research was designed and conducted to contribute quality knowledge and valuable understanding to a sparse field, while maintaining integrity. This was ensured through careful consideration throughout the process, collaboration with academic supervisors and cautious reporting of findings with explicit acknowledgement of factors influencing the study. Misleading information was avoided through employing a thorough literature review, and with sensitive application of psychological theory to provide participants with guidance to help and avoid harm. The research aims transparently delineated the intentions, and potential risks of harm were considered throughout, for example in using professional judgement in interviews to determine appropriateness of progression, and ensuring practical guidance was distributed to all participants with opportunities for further discussion if necessary.

Social Responsibility. Psychology researchers must be respectful of social structures and avoid unnecessary disruption, unless it is judged that the benefits of intervention outweigh the costs of such disruption (BPS, 2010; p.10). The study is explicit in using and generating psychological knowledge for the beneficial emancipation of an invisible vulnerable group. This supports the integrity of individuals and contributes to the ‘common good’ through promoting wellbeing and achievement more generally amongst schools and families. A high level of self-

reflection was required to determine this latter point as a predicted challenge was the reluctance of adults around young people to address a potentially controversial issue. Reframing the situation as 'meeting individual need to *ensure* success' was helpful in promoting the 'common good' outcome of the study and therefore raising motivation of the adult participants.

Maximising Benefit and Minimising Harm. The research was considered from the perspective of the participants to maximise the benefits of taking part and minimise risks, for example to psychological wellbeing, mental health, personal values or dignity from engaging in unfamiliar activities, particularly when considering the more vulnerable group of under 16's. Of particular relevance here was personal values, as the research explored personal constructs. Previous experience working within mental health services, along with EP training allowed me to exercise appropriate professional and ethical judgment throughout, particularly when discussing personal constructs which had the potential to cause distress and challenge identity through inducing self-awareness. Informed consent ensured participants were aware the process could reveal ideas of which they were previously unaware, resulting in a self-selecting group. Empathic attunement helped gauge levels of comfort with exploratory topics, and participant wellbeing took priority over information-gathering. As a result of sensitive attunement and containment, participants relaxed and felt able to explore deeper constructs. The inducement of stress in the opening activity for students and parents was carefully managed, through prior explanation that participants could abstain from any part of the interview, removing the onus of direct communication at the start of the interview process, giving them some sense of control through providing choice of task and

instruments, careful observation for signs of anxiety throughout, minimum time period for the activity, and a full debrief immediately after to allow participants to reflect and use strategies to self-soothe as required. This practical experience was beneficial for engaging participants actively in some of the issues to be explored. Praise and reassurance was given to all, helping to build rapport, protect self-image and resulting in an experience in which the benefits outweighed the risks. The informal conversation following the interview helped contain the interview experience.

There was need for sensitivity around the potential impact of the intervention. The guidance was thoroughly and cautiously planned to include participant voice, practical experience and sound psychological theory to provide a tool for participants to use in their own time, when ready. It included recognition of values and identity to support any emergent self-doubt, and actively challenged unhelpful behaviours. The inclusion of contact details for ongoing support was vital to contain the potential impact of the intervention. Reflections on the ethics of the study can be found in the Discussion.

4 Findings

This section is organised according to the research questions for each Phase. Participants' quotations are followed by their group code; Y9 (Year 9), Y10 (Year 10), P (Parent) or T (Teacher).

4.1 Phase One

What different conceptions of *perfectionism* are to be found amongst young people, parents and teachers? The identified commonality, fragmentation and sociality corollaries from the data are now presented to answer this question. Due to the richness of the data, a full narrative account of the themes which emerged to answer each sub-question, including further supporting quotations and analysis of quantitative data can be found in Appendix J. Figures 18 and 21 highlight the themes of the first answers given by participants to "what is a *perfectionist*/'non-*perfectionist*'?"

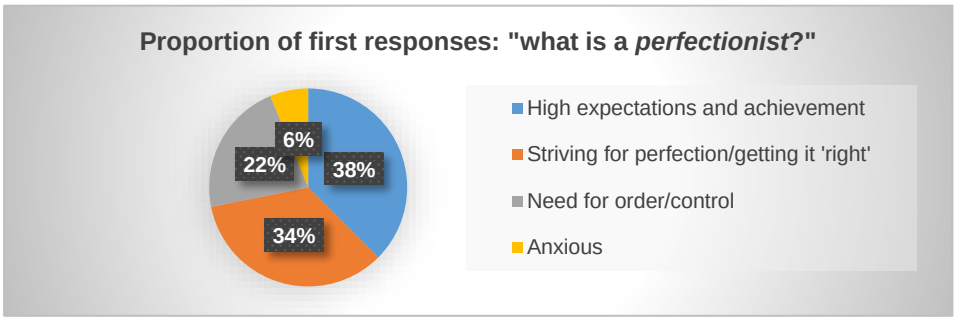

Figure 18. Proportion of first responses: "what is a *perfectionist*?".

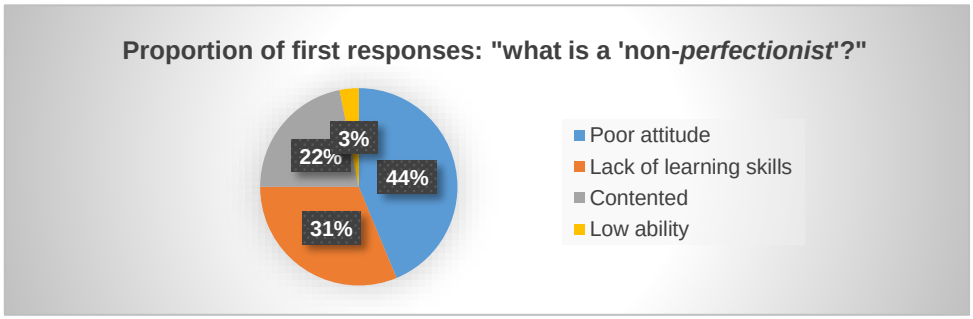

Figure 21. Proportion of first responses: "what is a 'non-*perfectionist*'?.

Commonality corollary. This refers to the similar internal models of reality between participants, and was strong within the study indicating a stereotype of a *perfectionist*. *Perfectionism* was predominantly perceived to relate to high expectations and achievement, a need for order and control, and self-criticism resulting in anxiety. It was largely perceived to be a trait, covering all areas of a person's life, particularly academia, and was considered desirable despite the perception of associated unhappiness, for example relating to positive learner characteristics and for some, actually 'being' perfect:

> *(what do you think about people who never make mistakes?) Perfectionists*? Er…well must work really, really hard to get that good, so I guess they have worked for it so you can't say…that…they have well they've worked for it haven't they so they deserve to get that far (Matt, Y9)
>
> a little bit of *perfectionism* and a little bit of positive attitude should gain you some happiness in life so I would favour going towards *perfectionism* (laughs) (Jane^, P).

From the analysis of the data the major themes which emerged across all participants for describing a *perfectionist* related to someone who is a 'high-achiever', 'strives for perfection', likes 'control', and 'holds certain beliefs about others':

> to be a *perfectionist* you have to know what's going on around you, what has happened, what is happening and what is going to happen (Delta, T)
>
> they have to come first, they have to be the best (Lizzie^, Y10).

Within these, positive commonalities emerged; 'conscientious', 'being perfect', 'having high standards', 'working hard', 'pride', 'responsibility', 'neatness' and 'order', with a single negative theme; 'avoidance'. Additional themes within these were; 'individuality', 'universality', 'others' beliefs', 'attention-seeking', 'satisfaction', 'self-

doubt', 'process', 'outcome', 'being prepared', 'excessiveness', 'balance' and 'isolation', hence as further themes were uncovered, more negative ideas emerged:

> usually you're very sensitive being a *perfectionist* and if you fail you really take it to, it's like you've lost everything (Joel^, P)
>
> a true *perfectionist* will never ever accept anything less than perfect, never accept that, and if it does go wrong, will cry, will be devastated (Claire, T)
>
> I think you'd really struggle to be happy as a *perfectionist* (Matt, Y9).

There were some commonalities between different participant groups, though these are interpreted cautiously with a view to suggesting further work rather than providing current conclusions due to the small sample. For example; within the grammar schools, dominant themes were 'conscientious' and 'high-achiever':

> Someone who always tries their best, demonstrating a lot of self-control…want to make a good job of everything…I think on results day when they get their results and they have done well, there's a great sense of achievement and satisfaction (James, T)
>
> Trying to work hard, coming first is well deserved (Dave^, P).

However the girls' school also had a further dominant theme of 'stress':

> Very happy with coming first but I think probably short-lived happiness because you're always then looking for what next, there's only one way to go you know, that level of expectation you know I need to keep doing this…am I putting myself under too much pressure in everything? (Sandra^, P)
>
> you want to get things right…(*what happens if it's not right?*)…they'd probably feel like they've let themselves down, let other people down, failed (Emma^, P).

The two comprehensive schools also had 'high-achiever', but also a focus on 'what other people think' and the notion of 'individuality', for example:

> They might think they're a bit, kind of snobby? Maybe. Or a geek, maybe a bit of a loner as well. As a teacher there's one of two things, you either think "ah brilliant! I've got somebody on my side!" or "this person is picking out every single little fault!" So it could go one of two ways (Delta, T)
>
> I think you're your own person and you're your own person for a reason, you're someone kind of, if you're a *perfectionist* you're different to everybody else, you erm, you shouldn't, I don't think you should kind of feel you should be judged by, for, because you're a *perfectionist*, you just like stuff doing to a certain standard and there's nothing really wrong with that (Jessica, Y10).

Although using small numbers, this possibly indicates the impact of culture between different schools. Taking students as a whole group, the dominant themes were 'conscientious', 'successful' and 'hard-working' as highlighted by Cato (Y10):

> I think I might be a bit of a *perfectionist*; I don't settle, like in the recent exams, whilst I've done well, well realistically I've done quite well, I prefer to get like the best result.

Amongst staff, there were dominant themes of 'high-achiever', 'control', and 'stressed', as highlighted in these comments from Marie (T):

> They're so meticulous…they would want everyone to behave in a quiet, calm way…if you're a *perfectionist* you're at the top and you know what you're doing…I think they're putting undue pressure on themselves.

Amongst parents, dominant themes were 'conscientious', 'high-achiever', and 'hard-working', as highlighted by Victoria (P):

> More prepared than any of the others, good at planning…I always think of a *perfectionist* as being quite a confident person…I would assume they would be at the top of the class quite a lot of the time.

Therefore the overall commonality between participants was in largely perceiving *perfectionists* to be hard-working, high-achievers, aptly captured in this teacher's comment:

> that's…as a teacher, you know, that's the sort of student you would hope to get (James, T).

Participants largely believed that *perfectionism* results from a combination of nature and nurture factors, predominantly nurture, and is maintained and exacerbated through the ongoing stresses of the modern world:

> Er (sigh)...do you know, I think the media has quite an important role to play, I think the government has an important role to play, the league tables. Add a lot of pressure. Erm...and you know for as long as we are sort of puppets of the government, and constantly striving for new targets, we're going to be passing on kind of pressure to our children. And you know I think that's quite unfair really (Marie, T).

Some likened it to a mental illness:

> I think it develops…er…as any mental illness…it's the sort of mental health…it doesn't grow from anywhere I think it just develops in, with their mental health like any other mental health issue. I think it can affect anybody. I think everyone at some point is a *perfectionist*. I think we all have our traits (Julia, T).

The following comment from Jessica (Y10) captures another negative element of this theme:

> maybe not getting the result you wanted or people telling you like face to face that you've not done too well, you kind of want that feedback so you know to do better, but you, that may kind of, if you've got a lot of stuff going on at the moment that kind of adds extra, kind of anxiety as such and pressure.

Participants of the girls' grammar school also believed that schooling may have a role to play. Participants largely believed that people who are 'non-*perfectionists'* are that way through a combination of nature and nurture factors, but in contrast, non-*perfectionism* comes from predominantly nature. This may inhibit participants thinking about 'non-*perfectionism'* as achievable, perhaps creating in some the need to defend against this by creating a more negative construct around it.

Participants clearly identified benefits associated with *perfectionism*, notably success, with some firmly believing that *perfectionism* is key to achieving success. There was less association with happiness, although some of the parents felt *perfectionists* will be happy as they are likely to achieve everything they want. Although a number of minor risks were identified, such as missing out on leisure and social time, and feeling stressed, few participants recognised the serious risk of mental health problems and suicide:

> if you're too perfect and you can't let it go it's gona hold you back because you're not gona be able to move on from it to then carry on with something else (Nadia^, Y10)

> They could constantly be frustrated which will constantly make them feel bad and in the end they could just not be able to sleep at night because they'll keep worrying about it so they won't, they'll be like really tired and everything so that'll make everything be knocked down which'll, if they're then not achieving as much as they used to be that'll make them want to be even more perfect so that'll keep going down (Emily, Y10)

> Many of the anorexics we have will not admit and are unaware and are miserable but are terribly *perfectionist* (Claire, T).

Participants believed that *perfectionism* can change, though some acknowledged it may be difficult, and all struggled to think of how to challenge *perfectionism*, though had ideas of how to combat stress and boost pride more specifically. This indicates that breaking down the term into constituent attributes may be helpful; guidance on how to change *perfectionism* was viewed as a beneficial suggestion by all. Significant barriers to change were appropriately identified as pride in the positive outcomes associated with *perfectionism* and a fear of becoming the polar opposite, aided by the visual bipolar construct diagram. It emerged, based upon their existing constructs, that many students would only change their *perfectionism* to become *more* rather than less *perfectionist*. A small number of participants believed *perfectionists* should only change if their *perfectionism* is having a negative impact, and others suggested *perfectionism* should be supported with helpful strategies rather than challenged. It was acknowledged that any motivation to change would need to come from the individual themselves, and may require external support, potentially from outside professionals.

Fragmentation corollary. This refers to conflicting constructs and was also evident within the study, largely within rather than between participants. There was little fragmentation between participants for describing a *perfectionist*, however themes for describing someone who is not a *perfectionist* were somewhat mixed; ‘relaxed’, ‘low achiever’, and ‘pride’:

> They don’t have the standards (Joel^, P)

> Some people might follow them like sheep because they're the cool guys (Brad, Y9)
>
> More "go with the flow" (Grace^, Y10).

Within these, further conflicting commonalities emerged; 'indifference', 'contentment', 'learning skills', 'lacking ability', and having a 'poor attitude':

> I think in some ways they're probably happy, happier because they don't worry, they might have the different priorities you see you know, but I've, I couldn't be like that. I say to my wife "I couldn't be like that, I couldn't" (Joel^, P)
>
> Just…not a very good attitude (Harry, Y10).

Additional contradictory themes to emerge within these were 'good learning skills', 'lacking learning skills', 'accepted', 'actively poor attitude', 'passively poor attitude', 'influences' and 'others' expectations'. There was a cautious sense of commonality between different participant groups; in the girls' school a strong theme of 'relaxed' and having 'good learning skills' emerged, though clear divides within the other schools between positive and negative attributes. Taking the participant groups as a whole, the students of the boys' school and the comprehensive schools felt a 'non-*perfectionist'* has a 'poor attitude', whereas the students at the girls' school viewed a 'not *perfectionist'* as more 'content', with low agreement between staff.

There was contradiction within participants regarding both *perfectionists* and 'non-*perfectionists'*, for example despite many participants highlighting 'negative' features of *perfectionists* they also tended to describe favourable aspects which they appeared to value, particularly when pride, happiness and success were discussed. Significantly, they largely appeared to value the perceived positive aspects more than they disliked the negative aspects:

> Obviously like the very high paid jobs like being a lawyer or something like that could be open to you because you get everything right (Harry, Y10)

> If you've got a student that has high expectations that wants to do medicine they've got to get their 4 A stars then yeah, *perfectionism* is key in that instance (Dave^, P)
>
> They will achieve and they will go far in life and like get what they want (Grace^, Y10).

This is reminiscent of Szymanski's (2011) assertion that:

> most *perfectionists* see *perfectionism* as one of their best traits – a characteristic that has helped them achieve a lot of what they value in life (p.50).

It is therefore likely that their response towards those students they perceive to have *perfectionist* behaviours could be somewhat conflicted and confusing for the individual. The apparent message appears to be "we acknowledge it will be really stressful for you, but your conscientiousness is likely to result in great success, and success is really important". The conflict arises with the equally strong messages, asserted by the majority of participants, that: "the most important thing is to be happy", "you'll be happy if you feel successful" and "stress makes you unhappy". This is likely to trap the *perfectionist* student in a vicious cycle of relentlessly pursuing success and feeling like a failure when they experience the inevitable stress of being outcome-driven rather than process-oriented. The following discussion with a parent highlights some of this conflict:

> *(How does somebody know they've done a good job?)* Generally it's how it's measured isn't it? If it's a piece of work and you get an A star you're gona feel chuffed. You don't really know yourself apart from that. So for the guys at school it's all about the marks that are given by the syllabus or by the examiner these days isn't it? This is a grammar school so it's about competition. *(What does 'successful' mean to you?)* Success is aiming at a goal, so achieving whatever that goal is, like the guys first time round it's GCSE's then it's the A-Levels. Success is getting yourself to that goal that you want. *(Is it important to be successful?)* Yeah, that's what we tell the children isn't it?! I think it is isn't it otherwise you'll end up doing something you're miserable at for the rest of your life (*so success and happiness are linked?)* Yeah yeah I think the two definitely are (Dave^, P).

The majority of participants identified that 'not *perfectionists'* would likely be happier, though less successful than *perfectionists*, despite linking stress with low achievement and *perfectionism* with stress. The conflict arose in their belief that success and happiness tend to be linked, forcing them to think about these

constructs differently. This highlights one of many implicative dilemmas in the research, and strongly motivates the production of guidance. Self-identifying student, Amy^ (Y9), eloquently identified the power of external motivators contributing to this conflict:

> I mean, in school you don't exactly get an award for being the happiest person! (laughs).

Her teacher, Claire, expressed evident conflict in describing 'not *perfectionists*' as having 'good learning skills' but not being 'high-achievers', and believing success can be taught but *perfectionists* are innately "*the clever girls*". Through a clear change in her tone of voice and facial expressions, Claire appeared to describe both non-valued then valued attributes within her description of 'non-*perfectionists'*:

> Random, lazy, purposeless. Gives up, does their own thing…Questions, questions for challenge, questions to go in a different way. 'Non-*perfectionists'* will take a risk. They're having fun, they're more light-hearted.

There was agreement between the parents of the boys' and girls' schools, who viewed 'not *perfectionists'* as more 'relaxed', but the comprehensive school parents viewed them as having 'poor attitudes'. There was hence less agreement for the construct 'not *perfectionist'* both between and within participants than for *perfectionist*, implying different responses to students based on individual beliefs about such *perfectionist* and 'non-*perfectionist'* behaviours.

Sociality corollary. This is the role played by another in interpreting someone's view of the world or interaction with others through understanding their constructs. I felt slightly uneasy around the participants who viewed *perfectionism* favourably, in

terms of conscientiousness and success, as though their expectations and standards were unreasonably high and they lacked awareness of the dangers of *perfectionism*. Similarly, I felt uncomfortable and somewhat under pressure around the participants who viewed 'not *perfectionists'* unfavourably, in terms of poor attitudes and low achievement. The values and priorities of these participants suggested they would probably seek out the *perfectionist* end of the bipolar construct for themselves and others and seek to avoid the 'not *perfectionist'* end, therefore their reaction to behaviours they perceive as *perfectionist* is likely to be reinforcement through passive approval or open encouragement, and towards 'non-*perfectionist'* as passive disapproval or open challenge. I felt it would be in the interests of those close to these participants to demonstrate more *perfectionist*-type behaviours in order to meet their approval and perhaps more importantly avoid their evident disapproval, particularly when considering *perfectionism* from an attachment or parenting perspective.

Perfectionist students would likely feel encouraged and approved of by these participants; this is likely to encourage them to spend more time with them and continue to seek their approval through continuing their *perfectionist* behaviours, thereby reinforcing the *perfectionist* thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Their anxiety about becoming the attributes associated with 'not *perfectionists'* may grow around these participants, further increasing their *perfectionist* behaviours. A conflict is likely to be in feeling they can never fully meet the participant's expectations; the relationship may therefore have an element of toxic dependency and therefore be complex to challenge.

These participants evidently felt somewhat challenged by the interview process, as conflicts in their thought processes were revealed regarding their beliefs about *perfectionism*, success and happiness. These are therefore perhaps the participants who had the most productive interview process as their reflections undoubtedly increased their self-awareness, potentially leading to changes in thinking. The EP role here is in raising these participants' awareness of the unhealthy aspects of *perfectionism* and shifting their thinking towards positive and valued aspects of 'non-*perfectionism'* in the form of 'optimalism' to provide a 'healthier' role model for students.

Conversely, I felt excited to be around those participants who viewed *perfectionists* unfavourably, in terms of stress and excessiveness, and 'non-*perfectionists'* favourably, in terms of good learning skills and contentment, since this presented stark contrast to views from my own schooling and EPS experiences. I felt warm towards these participants and as though I would like to learn in their company; I got a sense of their 'growth mindset' towards learning and balanced approach to life. Such participants are likely to seek out the 'non-*perfectionist'* end of the bipolar construct for themselves and others, and avoid the *perfectionist* end. Hence their reaction to perceived *perfectionist* behaviours is likely to be passive dislike or active challenge. It would likely be in the best interests of students close to that participant not to display *perfectionist*-type behaviours in order to avoid their disapproval; instead the emphasis is on developing positive learning skills in a warm, accepting atmosphere.

However, *perfectionist* students may feel uncomfortable and challenged around them, may struggle to identify with them and hence not engage with or value their contributions. They would therefore likely spend less time with them. However there may also be a fascination with such people through curiosity about ideas which appear to conflict dramatically with the student's beliefs about their own and others' expectations. A conflict may arise that the students feel these people understand and recognise their 'shadow self'; refusal to acknowledge this may be a defence for the student or perhaps they feel unaccepted for who they really are, leading to distress. This may make them both want and not want to spend time with the participant, resulting in conflict.

These participants felt supported in the interview process, particularly discussing stress and happiness, which largely appeared to reinforce already-held beliefs hence no noticeable changes in thinking took place around this. However they were noticeably challenged by the discussions around success, becoming aware of the conflict experienced by *perfectionist* students and in their own values, and being forced to tolerate the conflict in their ideas about *perfectionism*, success and happiness, potentially leading to changes in thinking. These participants notably were the most keen to engage in further work around the research, perhaps feeling their beliefs had been validated and they had something positive to contribute. The EP role here would be encouraging them to share their views with others and supporting them to help students feel accepted and supportively challenged to change, acting as an advocate within the system.

Finally, I felt a little unsettled and slightly detached from those participants who viewed *perfectionists* or 'non-*perfectionists'* somewhat neutrally, for example in terms of liking to do well and sometimes overdoing things (*perfectionists*) or indifference ('non-*perfectionist'*). These participants are not likely to hold strong beliefs hence their reaction to students demonstrating what they perceive as these behaviours is likely to be fairly neutral. I got the sense they lacked experience and awareness of the extremes of behaviour, thoughts and feelings relating to *perfectionism*; those close to them may feel quite uncontained and misunderstood, particularly if they were struggling with distressing thoughts and feelings.

Perfectionist students may feel conflicted around such participants. They may feel comfortable, at ease and un-judged, finding their lack of strong opinions refreshing, particularly if they are familiar with strong home or school influences regarding behaviour. Or perhaps they would appreciate the lack of awareness of extremes, fitting their desire to present a perfect image. This could make them spend more time with such individuals. However, if they do, it is likely they won't feel able to present their true selves, resulting in conflict and preventing an open and trusting relationship. These participants' passive neutrality may make students feel misunderstood or unappreciated, resulting in them feeling uneasy or resentful around such participants. This would make them unlikely to value their opinions or judgements and therefore conflicted about spending time with them. These participants felt challenged by the discussion of success, happiness and *perfectionism* as it revealed to them their lack of previous thought on the issues. It is therefore likely to have revealed thinking of which they were previously unaware. The EP role for such participants is in raising their awareness of the extremes of

thoughts, feelings and behaviour that may arise with the opposite ends of a construct, so that they can be more alert to students who may be presenting a façade.

These findings highlight the potential for *perfectionist* students to feel conflicted; either socially isolated or unaccepted for their true selves, leading potentially to distress and poor mental health. They also highlight the difficulty with engaging *perfectionist* students in change; the value of change to the student must be carefully negotiated, and support for change offered in a genuine and containing way so that motivation for change increases. Acceptance *and* challenge is a key combination, mirroring the conflict likely to be experienced by *perfectionist* students regarding their true and ideal selves. This idea was incorporated into the guidance and reflects approaches used in addiction interventions, prompted by comments by a number of participants in the study:

> It's almost like an addiction, it's like a drug that you can't leave off (Joel^, P)
>
> It's kind of like taking someone off drugs (Isabelle, Y10)
>
> It's like Alcoholics Anonymous; you have to do your 12 steps I think for a *perfectionist*! (Claire, T).

What kind of contradictions and potential issues emerge in these constructions of *perfectionism*? The following narrative highlights the high level of contradictions and potential issues which emerged within participants' accounts (see Table 18, Appendix J for supporting evidence).

Analysis of the data revealed that participants believed that there is an obvious stereotype of a *perfectionist*; this is a 'model' student who works hard even if others aren't, and is controlled. They are successful and high-achieving, and confident and happy when they achieve. They are proud of themselves and even boastful. However they are stressed and worried about not achieving; they don't like making mistakes, just because they like things to be 'right'.

Although *perfectionism* may arise through a combination of factors, it is largely just how some people are; it is a personality trait and fulfils no real function. However it is largely the family who cause it and school does not have much role to play in how it arises or is maintained. 'Non-*perfectionism*' also arises through a combination of factors, but is largely down to nature. *Perfectionists* get stressed and are likely to be somewhat unhappy and perhaps miss out on social occasions. However, they are successful and do well in life, which generally makes people happy. So in effect, they are happy, but stressed. But unhappy people are stressed. *Perfectionism* is a mental illness like OCD or disability like ASC, which involve suffering on the part of the individual. However these also have beneficial features like attention to detail which are needed for certain jobs.

Change is probably hard for a *perfectionist*, and may even be possible only through a drastic event changing their thinking. However they just need help to know it is ok to make a mistake and to 'let it go', but they probably won't listen to this. Although there are some practical strategies that could help reduce stress or improve a sense of pride in students generally, there is nothing obvious that can be done by other

students, parents or teachers to help *perfectionist* students. It will probably need the person themselves to decide to change, and outside professional help. However, students in the study would, on the whole, prefer to be high in *perfectionism* than low, and teachers would rather their student be higher in *perfectionism* than low, even though they relate *perfectionism* to stress and a poor social life. These *misconceptions* and contradictions present real challenge in terms of participants' existing behaviour towards students high in *perfectionism* and their increased self-awareness of these beliefs through the interview process.

Does this research approach provide sufficient information to identify students' needs? This research question sought to explore different approaches to understanding students' needs relating to *perfectionism*, without the use of published self-rating scales. What follows is a summary of the effectiveness of the different aspects of the approach. For the purposes of the current research, the students I perceived to be high in *perfectionism* were Amy^, Maddy^, Grace^, Jessica and Charlotte. The students I perceived to be high in 'optimalism' were Isabelle, Brad and Lizzie^ (see Table 19, Appendix J). To compare and contrast, examples of these students' opening activities, success, happiness and *perfectionism* constructs can be found in Tables 21 and 22 (Appendix J). There is acknowledgement and intent that these perceptions are not based on standardised rating scales but rather the factors identified in Table 4. Full ratings for all students can be found in Appendix E and are explored further in the Discussion.

To what extent do self-rating, teacher-rating, parent-rating and researcher rating correlate for student's 'level' of perfectionism? Table 22 shows student ratings of *perfectionism* by each participant group and myself as researcher (Appendix J). Table 23 shows the Pearson correlations between student, school and researcher ratings:

Table 23

Correlations between ratings of student perfectionism by researcher, school and student (n=17)

Rating of *perfectionism*			
	By researcher	By school	By student
By researcher	1	.433	.556* (sig. .021)
By school	.433	1	.256
By student	.556* (sig. .021)	.256	1

* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

There was significant correlation between the researcher and the students' own ratings, but none between school and student ratings, nor between researcher and school ratings. This has important implications for the EP role in helping schools identify students high in *perfectionism*. The correlation, however, is far from a perfect match, reflecting perhaps students lacking awareness of their own *perfectionism*, using different constructs from the researcher, ineffectively attempting to conceal *perfectionism*, or researcher observations being inaccurate. Of the participants, eight pairs were parent-child relations. No significant correlation was found for these students between ratings of *perfectionism* by role, highlighting the difference in perspective across individuals (Table 24, Appendix J). The closest ratings came

between child and parent, suggesting similarities between these relations in their construction of *perfectionism*. Although not significant, it was interesting to note the researcher and student ratings experienced an inverse relationship. The majority of these students rated themselves lower in *perfectionism* than I did. A possible explanation is that this group of students represented a different sample to those whose parents had not participated, hence may need to be thought about differently.

A tentative exploration of the relationship between parent and child levels of *perfectionism* showed that in this small sample, there was a significant correlation between my rating for parent and child (Table 25, Appendix J); the rating was the same for seven of the eight pairs, suggesting perhaps a possible area for family as well as individual support. There was no significant correlation between parent *perfectionism* as identified by the student, and student *perfectionism* as self-identified (Tables 27 and 28, Appendix J), suggesting perhaps a lack of identification with parents in terms of *perfectionism*-related qualities. Although not significant, there was an inverse relationship between self and mother *perfectionism* as perceived by the student, and a positive relationship between girls and father *perfectionism* as perceived by the student adding tentative support to the existing literature, though clearly requiring further study with larger populations. Students noticeably struggled to rate their parent's level of *perfectionism*, suggesting perhaps a difficulty relating the construct to their parents, or a reluctance to record their thoughts about this.

Which aspects of the research approach were the most helpful for identifying possible needs relating to perfectionism amongst students? The approach explored the unique perspectives of individuals, while offering the opportunity to observe the participant during different activities, including interaction with the researcher. However, there were two further elements; obtaining a 'rating' of *perfectionism* for the student from their school, and parent discussion where possible. Table 28 (Appendix J) summarises the usefulness of each approach for determining student need, revealing the most helpful aspect to be individual work with the student. The value of the therapeutic relationship and the power of empathic attunement to create a containing space is captured in this reflective comment by Charlie (Y10) at the end of our interview:

> You know more about me than anyone now! I've told you everything! About school, and about home! My counsellor knows all about home but not school; my tutor knows all about school but not home, and you know them both! I don't know what you did but I felt like I could open up to you.

This finding does not support the consultative method of EP service delivery as it may be viewed as disempowering to the adults around the student, time-consuming, and expensive within a traded model. However, what it does highlight is the privileged position an EP holds within the systems around a young person. Perhaps there is scope for training school staff to do this type of individual work. The least useful aspect was staff rating of student *perfectionism,* since this did not correlate with how the student saw themselves, or how I saw the student. However it was beneficial in gaining a better understanding of the students' experience of the world and staff perception. Therefore, the skills of school to acknowledge and meet the needs of students high in *perfectionism* is an area for EP support; the EP acts in a facilitative rather than expert way, in order to build the capacity of the school to meet

the identified needs of students. Parental discussion was helpful and parental involvement is ideal. Ultimately, a combination of approaches was beneficial for gaining a comprehensive perspective, rather than one aspect in isolation, which alone provided limited use in identifying students' needs.

4.2 Phase Two

What may be considered helpful strategies for supporting students high in *perfectionism*? To consider this research question, guiding information from each source was consulted (Table 29, Appendix K). My reflections on the findings are summarised below and directly informed the production of guidance for schools and families.

The literature. This suggests a combination of support tailored to the individual (predominantly cognitive-behavioural or psychodynamic approaches), groupwork, different teaching approaches and involvement of the family, with interventions specifically targeting *perfectionism* rather than being more general. Building core competencies, developing resilience, using bibliotherapy and online services may be beneficial, although lack clear guidance. Schools may be natural places for intervention work; adults need to be more aware of and alert to *perfectionism* in students and monitor the discrepancy between aspirations and performance. A school campaign to promote self-compassion and a 'growth mindset' as a substitute for self-criticism may be helpful. Considerations are the conflicting emphases within the environment on accomplishment and emotional wellbeing, the

possible function of *perfectionism* as a defence mechanism and the implications of challenging this, alongside the limited guidance on the EP role or MDT.

External professionals. These discussions supported a combination of individual and systemic approaches, for example the use of both group and individual art/music/play/talking therapeutic interventions, to provide the space to be 'messy' ("*an analogy for letting out the messy feelings they might be trying to repress*"; Mary), and a systemic approach involving child, family and school. There was a strong emphasis on an MDT approach involving relevant professionals, particularly the EP to educate staff and parents regarding appropriate interventions and challenge the positive view of *perfectionism*, and also to help contain the individual or group therapy by supporting staff and parents who may struggle with their own emotional wellbeing when supporting vulnerable students:

> It would be great to have space to support teaching staff to understand what they are experiencing, think about how to support children and also to offer them more understanding of themselves to create empathy and resilience (Mary).

Reflecting the literature, there was evident consensus for a CBT approach, incorporating mindfulness, exposure, exploring feelings, appreciating the messiness of life and gaining acceptance that mistakes are ok, as well as exploring others' perceptions and providing psychoeducation regarding the benefits and risks of *perfectionism*. This also includes the development of coping skills for when things do not go perfectly, exploring areas of worth outside of academic achievement; keeping a 'positives log' and doing a continuums exercise of extremes to encourage students to see the middle ground. Some professionals suggested teaching children in primary rather than secondary school about thinking patterns, schools emphasising

processes rather than outcomes, raising awareness of warning signs and when to refer on to avoid more complex mental health problems developing, encouraging student debates on areas on *perfectionism* such as the perfect body and raising staff as well as students' self-esteem. There was also a strong theme of providing students with talking opportunities with a key attachment figure or external adult, naming what is happening for them personally and in relationships with others. Considerations include being mindful of students trying to be 'perfect' at therapy or making the discussions academic rather than personally meaningful, the need for high self-awareness, the long-term nature of the process and containment of the therapy, the availability of resources, how to involve parents and staff who may be resistant, engaging young people in therapy and their competency to agree.

EPs. Supporting an eco-systemic approach, the EPs favoured a consultation approach with school and family, in which a shared hypothesis is formulated regarding the behaviour and possible underlying needs, and an action plan agreed then later reviewed. One suggested individual work with the student to identify elements of competition and anxiety, supporting the above findings regarding the value of individual work. The notion of building resilience was strong, helping the student to become more comfortable with challenge or difficulty. In agreement with the external professionals, EPs also highlighted systemic work focussing on the attitudes and viewpoints of staff when they're working with students; encouraging processes rather than outcomes and the distinction between learning and knowing. Possible barriers to these approaches include possible local authority restrictions, the 'depth' of the personality trait and difficulty changing behaviours in older students, and students' lack of self-awareness:

> It involves a level of self-awareness that possibly they haven't got and the danger is if they haven't got it they're just rolling on like a runaway train, and where do runaway trains go? Off the tracks! (John).

Ofsted pressure was recognised by the EPs, creating target- rather than process-driven school cultures, and difficulties overcoming fixed ideas about intelligence and achievement. Supporting the current study, the EPs saw real value in their role to support students high in *perfectionism*, and in that of the MDT rather than professionals working in silos. In this sense, the professionals in the study suggested interventions which have not been adequately explored with students high in *perfectionism*, but which offer hope based on current practice.

Students, parents, teachers.

> They need to talk to someone that knows what they're talking about! (Nadia^, Y10).

Participants had a variety of ideas for intervention, from individual actions to reduce stress such as having breaks from work and relaxing with friends or TV, seeking out someone older to talk with, doing more of the things they don't like doing, realisation and acceptance that things will be fine if they make a mistake, distinguishing between what is and is not under their control, preparing themselves for change, learning relaxation techniques or coping mechanisms, noticing the time they would have for enjoyable things if they spent less time on work, learning to "let go" a little bit and "go with the flow", and learning not to worry or overanalyse. External actions were also suggested at increasing eco-systemic levels, such as praising students to increase their sense of pride, special arrangements for exams (e.g. use of computer), increasing their motivation to change by highlighting the current negatives, more mental health support in schools, guidance for schools and families,

governmental changes to address the impact of the pressures facing young people, or a major external event causing personal impact. Of note, the impact of the media or religion were not discussed.

Identified barriers were pride in the perceived positive outcomes of *perfectionism* and fear of becoming the polar opposite, reflecting PCP and CBT approaches. Participants hinted at the involvement of other professionals if done sensitively, though did not discuss an MDT approach. On the whole, the students, parents and staff advocated a medical model for individual treatment and lacked systemic ideas, reflecting the current literature. The following comments highlight the lack of awareness of these participants regarding proactive strategies to change unhelpful cognitions:

> …it might get too much and…er…I think that's the only way it would go to not *perfectionist* if it all gets too much (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> Illness? Supposing you developed a brain injury I dunno, erm it may change the way you think. I dunno a major event something like a marriage or death or children I think can all change your focus sometimes…a major event like parents' separation and things like that (Debbie^, P)
>
> I think that could be possibly even like therapy sort of, seeing a psychologist if it was that bad (Lizzie^, Y10).

What psychological theories, not currently addressed in the literature, could apply to supporting perfectionists? What follows are suggestions based on psychological theory, rather than evidence-based practice. They therefore provide a springboard for further work as well as informing the current study. The first consideration is what to do, using an eco-systemic approach. At an individual level, analysing the participant interviews and literature suggests a dominant function of

perfectionism; that of anxiety management. It is hypothesised that underlying this are four possible unmet needs, evidenced through the following examples:

Cognitive need: *Perfectionism* may reflect a 'need' for the reinforcement of cognitive errors and 'Type 1' thinking. The following monologue from Joel^ (P) highlights a number of cognitive distortions (in bold; see Appendix Q) being reinforced through *perfectionism*:

> *Perfectionism* is how you see something…when people just say "ah that's good that" and don't say "that's amazing, you've done a fantastic job!" you think "oh do they think I've done a good job, maybe it's not quite as good as I think" (**filtering**)…if you're doing a skill and it's something that's not turned out, it's like the end of the world (**catastrophising**)…if you're a real *perfectionist* life's hard and it gives you a lot of slaps (**global labelling**)…if you feel you've not done well it does make you feel depressed (**black and white thinking**)…a *perfectionist* I don't think is ever happy in what they do because they can always do better (**overgeneralisation**)…if they're looking to be a *perfectionist* 'cause you know they think they're gona be successful and happy, they won't! (**jumping to conclusions**)…(non-*perfectionists*) don't have the standards, I couldn't be like that (**personalisation**)…they'll think I'm not so good at what I do, I have to keep up that standard (**always being right**)…it's a huge pressure that you've put yourself…it's a torment really (**blaming**)…I've thought, "what have I done, I should've done that and I've not" (**shoulds**)…you know you've gotta do better next time, sometimes I think you don't get over something you've made a mistake at (**control fallacy**).

Emotional need: *Perfectionism* may reflect an affective need, perhaps indicating unmet attachment needs and an attempt to control the survival drive. This quotation from Amy^ (Y9) highlights an emotional need perhaps being met through *perfectionism*:

> My parents have always been you know like happy with what I've done and I don't know why sometimes I feel like erm…if I come home with a particular result or whatever and give it to my parents and they're just like "oh that's really good", it's kind of like they don't pay much attention to it, I sometimes get a bit upset because I sometimes feel that, aw this is gona sound really awful, that it's…oh!…'Cause I've always I guess in school been really quite a…high-achiever? Erm…and sometimes I feel it's got to the point where even if it's a really big achievement in school or with my friends or with me, my parents are kind of used to it! They don't really….and then I get a bit frustrated then, like…at the same time I don't wana be "look how amazingly I've done, why don't you!", whatever, but at the same time it's nice to just feel as if somebody's appreciated your work.

Another significant quotation within this hypothesis of need is from Jessica (Y10), who, following discussion with her teacher, Julia, was apparently talking about her own situation in this hypothetical discussion of *perfectionism'*s origin:

> You might have been brought up in a family that maybe didn't try as well and it wasn't kind of all about work, work, work kind of thing, so you want to maybe kind of turn things round a little bit, show that you can do better as such maybe, maybe you've got an older sister or brother that didn't do too well at school, you might want to do better as such, or you might feel pressured into doing better…maybe it's a distraction away from what's actually going on in the outside world.

This shows a high degree of self-awareness and ability to reflect, without necessarily being able to find a solution, suggesting Jessica is in a somewhat uncomfortable position regarding her identity and therefore an ideal position to embark on the process of change.

Sensory or neurological need: *Perfectionism* may reflect an underlying need for order, predictability and routine so the individual feels calm and in control. The following quotations from Isabelle (Y10) suggests a more sensory or neurological need being met through what may appear to be *perfectionism*, demonstrating her ability to reflect a complex and challenging idea articulately:

> My brain feels kind of tense and fuzzy…it's not really in my body it's just connection to my brain…the problem with the timer being in front of me I was seeing the time going down, I was trying to watch both at the same time…I was aggravated by it…for me it would be order, everything needs to be in a certain order.

Isabelle frequently referred to her "order" and how she gets upset if anyone changes this. In addition, she asked to draw a diagram to explain her answer to the question "what is school for?", suggesting perhaps a neurological preference for visual support to process her thoughts and words. Within this diagram, there was a logical flow from birth to death, suggesting again perhaps a neurological preference for order and predictability. However, Isabelle also demonstrated some clear 'optimalist'

qualities, suggesting perhaps these mediate the effects of the *perfectionism* relating to a possible underlying neurological need.

Social communication need: Finally, *perfectionism* may reflect a need for social belonging in a student lacking appropriate social communication skills; the *perfectionism* may be an attempt to reduce the anxiety of social situations. For example, at frequent points throughout the interview, Charlotte (Y10) used the phrase "*I dunno*" and "*I'm not sure*" with a nervous laugh, or her comments tailed off unfinished as though she was struggling to find words to express herself. She generally presented as socially anxious through her body and para-language, such as blushing, limited eye contact and hesitant, quiet voice. It may be that her *perfectionism* is a way to reduce anxiety from an underlying social communication need, reinforced through her discussion of *perfectionists* being picked on by others for being 'teacher's pet'. At this point in the discussion Charlotte noticeably became more animated and confident in what she was saying, making me consider whether she was referencing a personal experience when sharing this idea. This hypothesis is also reinforced by the lengthy and detailed feedback e-mail she provided, which contrasted her limited verbal contributions when interviewed in person.

Despite these different hypothesised underlying needs (along with the possibility that an individual may experience one or more of these needs in addition to and unrelated to signs of *perfectionism*), for the purpose of simplicity for the current study, it was considered that similar strategies could be used to help support such students. Practically, this could be explored further on a case-by-case basis with an

EP, and within research would require much larger-scale study. Table 30 (Appendix K) shows different strategies matched to the different needs, highlighting the importance of developing coping strategies to manage anxiety along with developing an environment which is accepting and provides clear boundaries and reinforcement.

This analysis was amalgamated into the following proposed framework for supporting students high in *perfectionism*, adapted from La Vigna and Willis's (1995) multi-element model. This shows how the responsibility for change is shared between all participants, rather than resting solely with the student or their family, in conflict with the predominant literature and Phase One discussions. It also highlights the need for both proactive strategies (green) to produce changes over time, and reactive strategies (red) to manage the behaviour at the time it occurs.

<table>
<tr><td>Emotional Needs
Acceptance/belonging, security</td><td>Environmental Change
'Growth mindset' approach to teaching and learning
Opportunities for sensory breaks</td><td rowspan="3">Reactive Strategies
Therapeutic interventions
Involvement of external professionals</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Communicative Function anxiety-management from unmet need (cognitive, emotional, sensory/neurological, social communication)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Teaching New Skills
Coping skills (including communication, self-esteem, problem-solving, planning, emotion regulation)</td><td>Reinforcement
Individual support plan, including review and recognition of progress
Home-school communication</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 27. The multi-element model for supporting students high in *perfectionism* (see Table 31, Appendix K for more detail).

A second consideration was what to do for whom, using JoHari's window. Interview analysis highlighted a significant theme of the level of awareness of individuals of their own *perfectionist* thoughts and behaviours. Using elements of the above model,

JoHari's window was adapted within the guidance to highlight strategies for intervention based on the level of awareness of students of their own *perfectionism*:

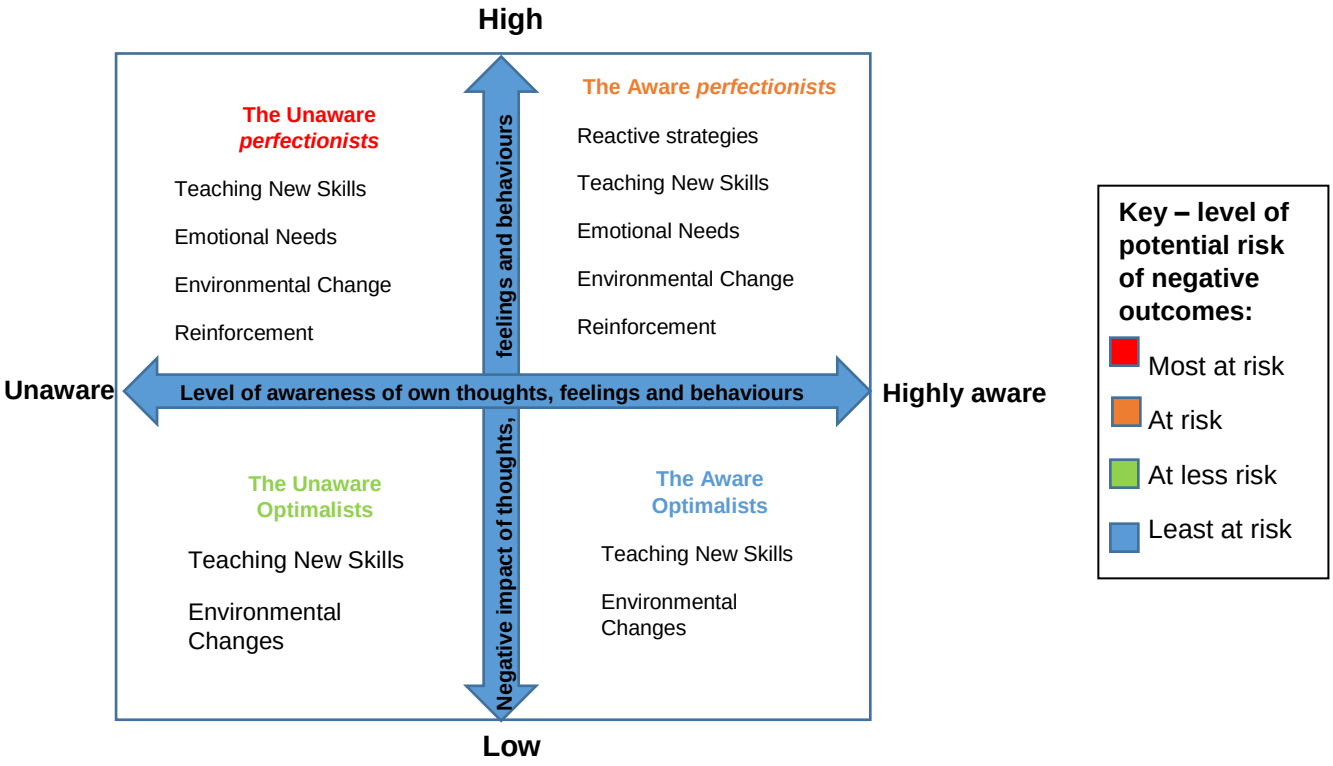

Figure 28. An adaptation of the JoHari window, as applied to *perfectionism.*

Reflecting the earlier model, this model suggests that teaching new skills and environmental changes can be beneficial for all students, however the meeting of emotional needs and reinforcement becomes more important when the impact of the *perfectionism* is more negative for the student. This is somewhat difficult to assess, since there may be a perceived positive impact in addition, for example the student feeling there are short-term gains from their behaviour, and it may be that the more negative impact is only evident in the long-term due to the cumulative effect of stress. Another important consideration is that the reactive strategies may only be beneficial for those students who have an awareness of their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This is pertinent as schools implementing only reactive strategies

are likely to be missing the above group marked in red who are potentially the most 'at risk'.

Another consideration was Prochaska and DiClemente's (1983) stages of change model, relevant for those likening *perfectionism* to an addiction (Claire, Isabelle and Joel^) and considered in adult *perfectionism* interventions (Szymanski, 2011; p.41). Considering *perfectionist* thoughts, feelings and behaviours from the perspective of addiction may be a helpful approach to understanding barriers to change and maintenance factors, and recognising the potential existence of *perfectionism* as an 'unhealthy' coping strategy. My interpretation of the model uses the notion of 'discrepancy' to help identify students at high risk. Further explanation of the quadrants can be found in Appendix K.

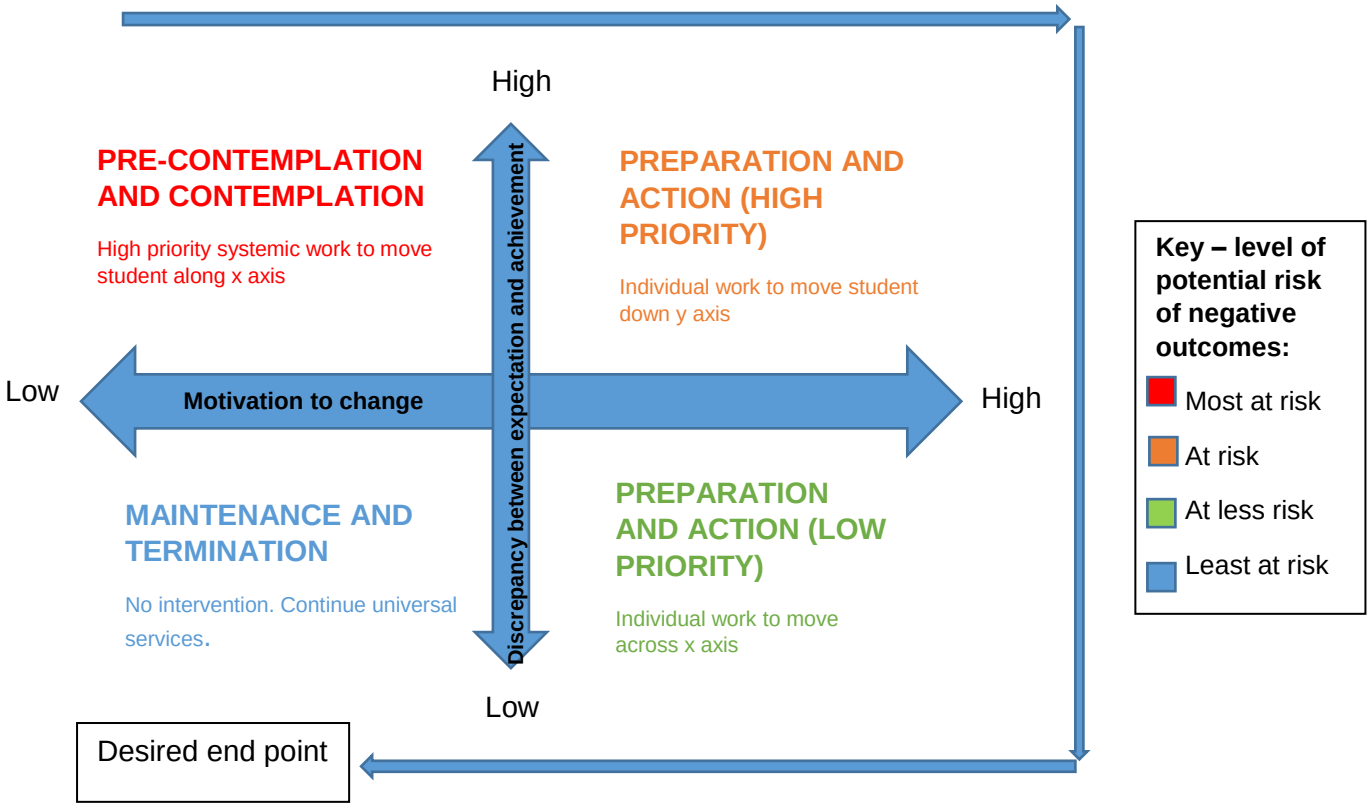

Figure 29. The stages of change model applied to *perfectionism.*

Further consideration included the 'Pareto principle' (the 80/20 phenomenon), applied by non-psychologist Koch (2005) to time management, suggesting that better use is made of time when investing efforts in the 20 per cent that attains 80 per cent of the results we want to achieve, and psychologists to procrastination and perseveration in *perfectionism* 'self-help' guides (e.g. Ben-Shahar, 2009; Shafran, Egan and Wade, 2010). This concept may be helpful within the guidance, both for the production process, and for staff to be efficient and effective in their support for students. This supports personality-based work by Stoeber (2011) into the notion of efficiency and *perfectionism*, which relates to the 'striving' element identified in Phase One. The following diagram illustrates my understanding of the 'Pareto principle' relevant to the study:

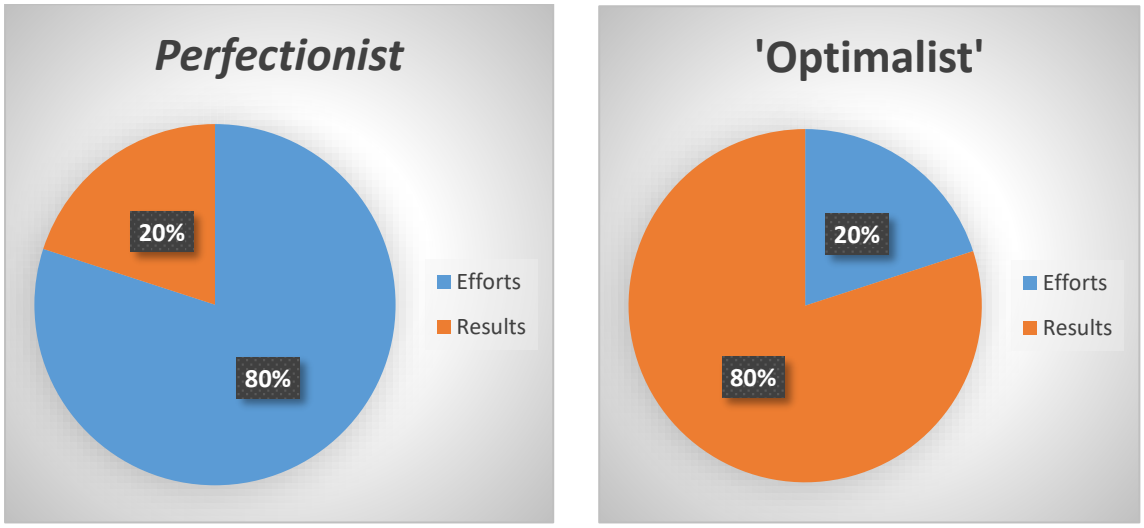

Figure 30. The Pareto principle applied to *perfectionists* and 'optimalists'.

The final consideration from psychological theory, relating to this idea of efficiency, is the notion of 'peak performance' discussed by Yerkes and Dodson (1908), again applied to *perfectionism* in various psychologist-authored 'self-help' guides (e.g. Ben-Shahar, 2009; Shafran, Egan and Wade, 2010). This has particular relevance for the

current study due to the association of *perfectionism* with high achievement, yet also with anxiety and stress. Including the Yerkes-Dodson Law curve in guidance could help raise understanding of why too much performance anxiety may actually inhibit achievement. The following figure (taken from Ben-Shahar, 2009; p.30) depicts this theory:

Figure 31. The Yerkes-Dodson Law.

How can guidance most effectively be disseminated? Each dissemination method has its advantages and disadvantages, therefore there is no clear 'best practice' for disseminating information. In the interests of practicalities combined with a 'best-fit' of participant preferences, the following guidance was produced:

- Students: Assembly, leaflet, personal card and PCP worksheet
- Parents: Leaflet and talk
- Staff: INSET presentation, resource booklet, staff 'crib sheet'
- All: Social media account, novelty pencil ("we all make mistakes" arrow towards eraser)

Please see Tables 33 and 34 (Appendix K) and Table 34 (Appendix L) for more detail on these decisions. There was largely similar content between these different

dissemination methods, though tailored to the different participant groups based on analysis from Phase One. Examples of the guidance can be found in Appendix M.

What do students, parents and teachers think about the guidance?

To what extent do students, parents and teachers feel the guidance is appropriate and effective to meet their needs? Feedback on the guidance was universally positive from all who took part in this phase. Table 35 contains the participants' overall summaries of the guidance (Appendix O). The following quotations capture the feelings of students, staff and parents:

> Overall, I think that the guidance is organised well and is extremely informative. I really like the fact that you have used multiple quotes and images to back up the ideas you are putting across (Charlotte, Y10)
>
> It's perfect, it's exactly what I wanted! (Julia, T)
>
> Very informative and covering issues you would probably be unaware of (Emma^, P).

The narrative findings from the evaluation conversations can be found in Appendix O and are now summarised under the emerging themes.

New learning and consolidation*.* Participants felt the guidance provided useful information about *perfectionism*, and many felt they themselves had learned more, reflected in the following comments:

> I definitely see *perfectionism* in a different light now as a result (Amy^, Y9)
>
> I particularly found the distinction between being conscientious and a *perfectionist* very helpful, as I think people will often refer to themselves as being a *perfectionist*, but not have the stress and anxiety associated with it (Michelle, T).

Something which stood out was the provision of a word (*perfectionism*) to describe what students were experiencing:

> It's good to have a word to describe it then you can tackle it. Until you've got a word you don't really know what's going on or why you find things so difficult. Knowing it's *perfectionism* helps you make sense of it (Cato, Y10).

Within the critical emancipatory approach, the study did not intend to reinforce the use of negative labelling. Charlie (Y10) gave the following insightful comment on this issue:

> No one label will fit someone perfectly but everyone strives to have a label and to fit in with some crowd!

Following Phase One, the study intended to provide a positive label for desirable behaviours. 'Optimalist' was a new word for all participants and was positively-received by most:

> I like the phrase 'optimalist', it's not one I'd heard before. It made me smile when I read it! I thought, that makes sense! (Marie, T)
>
> I must admit, I didn't really know about the concept of an 'Optimalist' but like it very much! (Jane^, P).

However one or two participants found it a little confusing, suggesting further explanation was required in the guidance to help clarify the terms being used:

> I'd heard of optimist. That's more common. I think the way you've done it suggests a *perfectionist* is pessimistic and that's not necessarily the case. Because people might think 'optimalist' is optimist and therefore the opposite is pessimist and therefore *perfectionist*. People might think the opposite of 'optimalist' is a pessimist which a *perfectionist* isn't. The line between them might make them make that link (Charlie, Y10).

The following comment from Joel^ (P) highlights the importance of parents having the presentation in addition to just the leaflet:

> 'Optimalism'. Had to look that word up as wouldn't know exactly what it means by reading this word on your front cover. I don't think the average parent or child would either. I would have prefered Optimist as most people understand this word? The definition of 'Optimalism' is as follows: 'Optimalism is a perspective, a philosophy, a set of precepts, a way of life, and a theory.' That surely doesn't necessarily mean the opposite of being a *Perfectionist* as 'Optimalism', by its very definition could also include an individual who is a *Perfectionist* who sees their *perfectionist* characteristics - as does the 'Optimalist' as being '"a perspective, a philosophy, a set of precepts, a way of life, and a theory'" Please correct me if I am wrong?

Using Internet search engines does indeed bring up the above definition, which may add to confusion if participants have not had the presentation which explains it in more detail, as for the following participants who understood once they had read the presentation notes:

> I didn't know what 'optimalist' was, I wondered if it's something like optimism. Once I worked it out I understood what it meant and it was fine (Nadia^, Y10)
>
> I didn't understand this word 'optimalist', I asked colleagues and looked it up on Google. I think a bit more description is needed of what it is before going on to talk more – I get it now totally, after reading the notes! (Julia, T).

An interesting comment from Claire (T) here reinforced the value of the research:

> 'Optimalist'? Isn't that something that comes with age?

This shows an unexplored construct perhaps of *perfectionism* being something one grows out of, and may be a view shared by other adults around young people. Through further discussion, I highlighted the different aspects of 'optimalism' that can be broken down into learnable skills to promote a more realistic and compassionate outlook in adolescence. On reflection, it may be that approaches such as that of Szymanski (2011) in which the term 'healthy *perfectionism'* is used, may act as a bridge for those participants for whom moving away from the notion of *perfectionist* feels too threatening or too much of a change. The language used is important to the meaning attributed, so although I would seek for people to move away from interpreting *perfectionism* positively, it may be a good first step for some students high in *perfectionism* to use the terminology with a prefix of 'healthy', 'adaptive' or 'positive' as in the existing literature to better protect what may be a fragile self-image. Over time and with movement towards healthier and more adaptive behaviours, the terminology 'optimalist' could be introduced.

The information made some participants reflect on their own constructs of success, and also prompted participants to think more broadly about the issue, for example discussing the impact of social media on teenagers' experience of pressures. A number of participants felt the guidance confirmed or clarified what they thought about *perfectionism*.

Self-awareness and identification with the guidance. Many participants reflected, unprompted, on their own identification with the guidance, either referring directly to themselves:

> That's a good bit, not asking for help, 'cause I don't like to ask for help. It's like when you have a problem and you type it into Google and you see other people have written about it, so you know you're not the only one (Cato, Y10)
>
> 90% of what's down on that paper is me, it explains me! I just feel like I'm going round in a circle. That roundabout is exactly it (Jessica, Y10)
>
> I like the meaning behind the pictures. The roundabout is exactly how it is, going round and round. I can see the stuff I thought was how I felt. My thinking is definitely all or nothing. My parents say that. (Grace^, Y10),

or referring to how they would implement the guidance to support students:

> I can definitely relate to this personally and feel the modern day pressures do have an effect on those students that do feel they have to achieve the best (Joanne, P)
>
> I can see as well how much my role as a teacher can influence student's perspective…Perhaps if staff had more awareness of the anxiety that comes from *perfectionism* then teachers might be more able to offer help so the school counsellor doesn't get overwhelmed (James, T)
>
> The CBT model fits well into our wellbeing curriculum (Claire, T).

All participants felt the research had captured their voice and that they had been heard and understood. The bipolar scale appeared to stand out in particular for the students, suggesting a useful tool for schools/EPs to use, for example:

> I like the scale, it's really practical and you can see really easily where you are (Nadia^, Y10).

Effectiveness of the guidance*.* On the whole, the guidance was considered to be effective, summed up by the following student:

> The use of metaphors, a story and some interaction make the presentation interesting. Cards are always a nice reminder and the leaflet has a nice presentation (it can be a good source of information for e.g. specific things and can be looked over more than once. We can read it in our own time). (Sage^, Y10).

All participants found the guidance informative. There was a strong sense among the self-identifying *perfectionist* students that others don't know what *perfectionism* means, strengthening support for the critical emancipatory approach of the study. These students found the guidance for others pleasing:

> Teachers and parents don't always get it, this explains it (Grace^, Y10)
>
> I like how you talk about both sides of *perfectionism* and go over the mental health side effects of it (this is something that many people forget to cover, or do not cover it with enough detail) (Isabelle, Y10).

This was reflected in comments by the staff and parents:

> I think the crib sheet is a great idea – I found it really useful (Delta, T)
>
> I will certainly observe my daughter with new insights and try to carefully help her on her way into adulthood (Jane^, P).

Contributing to the effectiveness of the guidance was its design, well-received by all participants:

> It's not too busy, and not too childish for our age group (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> It looks like something you'd want to pick up and read. Doesn't look, not sure what but sometimes leaflets can be over cramped. The leaflet is definitely fun (Emily, Y10)
>
> The presentation looks fab, really nice and clear both in terms of definitions and aesthetically too! (Delta, T)
>
> The parent leaflet is very colourful. Visually, I like the tree comparison especially the "acorn" tree giving a subtle but strong positive (Emma^, P).

A number of participants insightfully reflected on the colours used:

> I like the colour scheme. It's good. I like the blue – it's a cool and calm colour. It pairs up with knowledge and stuff as well (Harriet^, Y9)

> I like the colours. The green suggesting how you should be and the red the opposite really works (Grace^, Y10).

Participants felt the information was accessible:

> There's lots of information, but not too much. It's a really nice format, small and easy to access (Harry, Y10).

The layout of the guidance also helped make it more accessible:

> I like the overall design. It's useful. You can easily find a certain section and go straight to it (Jessica, Y10)
>
> I like how things are all in boxes; that makes it easier to read (Maddy^, Y9).

The images were particularly well-received to support the text:

> The explanations are worded in a way that is easy to understand, the roundabout and bike metaphor is a really good aid (Sage^, Y10)
>
> There's a nice balance of diagrams; that makes it user-friendly (Marie, T).

However the accessibility of the guidance was challenged by the use of more complex words:

> I understood it all, maybe other people might not necessarily, maybe words like nuanced, conscientious, procrastination. I know what they mean but some might not (Brad, Y9)
>
> All understandable although the term "nuanced" is a word that I do not know what it means and for many other parents, I feel they may not understand what this word means also and therefore would have to take the time to look it up in a dictionary (Joel^, P).

A couple of the staff found the discrepancies model slightly more challenging to understand at first glance, suggesting a need to amend:

> I wasn't clear on the model which students are of most concern bit, I couldn't really understand it just from the picture (Julia, T)
>
> One part of the Powerpoint was hard to understand, the model bit. If I don't immediately get something I will tend to move on (James, T),

but on the whole, the accessibility of the pack was valued by staff and parents:

> The pack is easy to follow, you don't often get that (Julia, T)
>
> The explanations are easy to understand (Victoria, P)

One staff member (Claire) suggested that less emotionally literate staff may struggle to use the information and may require the guidance to be broken down further still; this is discussed under 'Adaptations'.

Many participants reflected that a key part of the guidance was raising awareness of the risks associated with *perfectionism*:

> The slightly negative bits in the leaflet about *perfectionism* are good, so you know everything before you develop a view on it and it's not all one-sided (Charlie, Y10)
>
> Whilst we all feel anxiety surrounding deadlines and workload, more often than not, this can be rationalised, but with some of our students it is this lack of rationalisation which compounds things – I think it is useful for staff to be aware of this when thinking of our students, and this comes across in your work (Michelle, T)
>
> I think society sees *perfectionism* as the best thing to be. I think there is enough information here to think a lot more deeply about it. There's information about the risks without there being a terrible scare story, you don't want to be alarmist. There's enough to then go off and read more if you want to. There's a nice balance (Marie, T).

There was also a sense that the information would be helpful for those students who were unaware of their own *perfectionism*:

> It someone was a *perfectionist* and didn't know they could look at the behaviours and think about if it applies to them. Also even if they're an 'optimalist' they could look at what to avoid so they don't become *perfectionists* (Cato, Y10).

Many participants stated that they knew some of these risks already, but it would be helpful for informing others, for example:

> I was already aware but I know most people aren't (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> I already knew these. The boxes are good, it's put it into words. I knew I should be preventing it but when you see it on the page it makes sense (Grace^, Y10).

This is interesting because few participants identified in depth the risks associated with *perfectionism* in the first phase of the research. However, when presented with the risks in writing, it appears they felt more familiar with these, more comfortable to

acknowledge them, or perhaps wanted to show that they knew this information already. One student who identified as a 'former *perfectionist'* (Brad, Y9) suggested that the risks be made even more obvious in the guidance.

Many participants discussed how their own awareness of the risks and dimensions of *perfectionism* had grown following the guidance:

> I didn't know it could lead to eating disorders. I bet that's image *perfectionism* is it? It's good you put that there's not just one type of *perfectionism*, there's grades yeah but there's also appearance (Cato, Y10)
>
> I wasn't aware that *perfectionism* can be limited to one or a few aspects of your life and still have quite an impact (Jane^, P)
>
> I never fully appreciated the extent to which it can cause mental illness and even suicide. We almost accept that *perfectionism* is a good thing in society, when actually it's not. Staff would definitely be surprised with the link (James, T).

Participants also positively discussed the strategies within the guidance:

> The pyramid looks to be quite useful, if someone realised they were *perfectionist* they could use that (Cato, Y10)
>
> I think one of the issues we have as teachers is that we project our own worries onto our students (we have targets that we need to meet, and so put this pressure onto the students) but it would be helpful for us all to remember the bigger picture and rather than to tell students they must do more, reflect on what will happen if they don't meet the high standards they (or we) set for them. I think that came across well in the strategies part of the presentation too, as well as the document – I know as a school we are trying to promote resilience amongst our learners and these questions and thinking go some way towards this. It is important we take the time to have these conversations with our students – be it in our capacity as classroom teachers or from a tutor/pastoral role. The paper documents are also helpful – clear and concise, with guided information. I am sure it will be of use to many staff, but I especially think many staff will get something from the presentation side of things too (Michelle, T)
>
> I would definitely keep a card with me along with lots of others (Amy^, Y9)
>
> The "ABCs of becoming more of an 'optimalist'" really stood out to me. I would find those tips useful myself, so I assume others would too (Charlotte, Y10).

However there was also a sense that some participants would prefer more concrete guidance to help them know exactly what to do. This is discussed in 'Adaptations'.

It was pleasing that self-identified *perfectionist* Joel^ (P) stated that the ABCs were "very helpful", however this excluded 'Attend':

> 'Giving equal attention to all areas of their life', I don't think this is possible for any given individual and in fact seems more like a *perfectionist* attitude. There are certain interests in life that each individual prefers to do and find a great interest in which naturally captures their imagination and commitment more than something else; which ironically, one gives more attention to than another topic or task that isn't so interesting or captures their imagination.

His interpretation of this strategy is perhaps indicative of his *perfectionist* cognitions and required greater explanation of the intention of this strategy. This was provided however must be considered for other parents who may be high in *perfectionism* themselves and interpret this or other strategies in unintended ways.

A powerful theme supporting the PAR approach arose in the language of proposed action through increased awareness, particularly amongst the staff:

> I wonder if it could be a whole school staff thing? It would be interesting for people to hear about it. It links in really well with the mental health bits we've been doing. I can definitely see some of our pupils who have these traits and want to adapt the activities to suit them, I like these activities. I think in PSHE it'd be nice to put them into a lesson. I'd like to start to talk to parents about it, I could share some of this with them (Marie, T)
>
> Something like this could be really powerful if it was incorporated into PSHE or development days for students too…*Perfectionism* could easily be incorporated into the learning styles area and this might then help students identify if they themselves are a *perfectionist* and then maybe start learning various coping mechanisms/ways of working etc. (Delta, T).

However some students and parents reflected upon the limitations of their guidance for instigating real change:

> The effectiveness will probably vary from student to student, but I think that lots will find it beneficial. It will definitely raise awareness, but whether people will act upon it is a different matter. Not everyone will be interested, but that is the same in any situation, and as long as you try to keep the presentation entertaining and engaging, there shouldn't be any major issues (Charlotte, Y10)
>
> It would definitely at least start at first glance make them think that's what I can work on but I don't think reading something will solve it (Emily, Y10)

> It could start something but it'd take more help from teachers to make more effect for a change (Jack, Y9)
>
> I think even though the leaflet is really good I think some students might miss the point of it – they might think I'm not a *perfectionist*, this isn't me. There could be an activity that goes with it, like what you did with me, you got me to draw a shape; that could go with it to help them see (Harry, Y10)
>
> I would like to see a bit more on how schools can support children more – are there certain activities that could help, raising awareness within the school environment, identifying children who are *perfectionists*? (Emma^, P)
>
> I do think that parents will be able to identify if they have children that are *perfectionists* but whether they are willing to do anything about it is another matter (Victoria, P).

These participants highlighted the need for staff support too, and were reassured by discussion of the guidance provided for staff.

Impact of research on participants. A powerful theme to emerge in the feedback was that of gratitude, both for involvement in the research:

> I was happy to help and delighted that you gave me the chance to take part in your research (Emily, Y10)
>
> I really enjoyed it! It was interesting (Brad, Y9),

and the provision of guidance for those students identifying as high in *perfectionism*:

> I'd like to say thank you for the guidance and strategies as I really feel they will help me a lot. Thank you again (Amy^, Y9)
>
> Thank you so much for this. Thank you! I think your research could really help me. Thank you for letting me be a part of your program and supporting what I find a daily struggle (Jessica, Y10).

Supporting the critical emancipatory paradigm, the interview process alone appeared to have provided enough of an 'intervention' for some participants:

> I'd just like to say thank you. You've done a really good job. You've definitely opened my mind. Last year I was definitely closer to the *perfectionist* side but now I know what I think isn't necessarily a bad thing and you don't have to be one or the other. Charlie and I were talking about it just this morning and he was saying the same, just the research, the interview bit has changed the way we think about it so thanks so much! (Harry, Y10)
>
> Thank you for giving us the opportunity to help with your research, I am only too happy to help further as I have already gained personally from the experience so far (Emma^, P).

For Emma^, this included opening up lines of communication between herself and her daughter, Amy^ (Y9). Given Amy's earlier reflections regarding her parents' reaction to her achievements, this was a powerful example of helping someone's voice be heard amongst systems perceived as dominant.

Some participants explicitly commented on the value of the research area:

> Trust your work will get some recognition and be of help to many budding *perfectionists*! You have done a great work which I am sure will help many people; which is a real credit to you. (Joel^, P)
>
> I found it very interesting and enlightening. I wish your information pack was around when I was at school! What you have produced is absolutely fabulous and I'm confident there is a need for greater awareness about the issue (James, T)
>
> I think you can give it out to all people not just people who you think have it. 'Cause if it makes one person think "that could be me" then that's good (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> I think it would be good to have it in a PSHE lesson, for everybody (Harriet^, Y9)
>
> It could definitely help people (Lizzie^, Y10).

What adaptations are required to develop the guidance to better meet the needs of the participants? The majority of participants could identify no changes they would make to the guidance. Some participants suggested minor amendments relating to design (colour, size, layout) or content (minor additions or alterations), for example Joel^ (P) desired specific mention of the words 'torment' and 'dread'. These were added to the parent presentation. Amendments can be found in Table 36 (Appendix O).

Reflection on the feedback highlighted more problematic issues relating to responsibility for change, readiness to change, willingness to seek help, and capacity to accurately self-rate if one did feel ready to change. Participants were reassured

that the school guidance addresses these issues. However, a more concerning issue was the apparent lack of capacity amongst some participants to personalise the strategies to meet their needs:

> I would like to see a bit more on how parents can support children more – are there certain activities that could help, handy hints for parents, are there any self-help groups in the local area? What peers can do to help, what are "healthy coping skills?" (on your ABC page) etc. (Emma^, P)
>
> It's good if you're emotionally literate but it might need breaking down further for other staff, for example how to judge which intervention to use, you and I might know, but staff might need pointers or questions to guide them. Perhaps make it even clearer and more transparent for teachers, what exact techniques are we talking about and just how important it is (Claire, T)
>
> I think the information is really useful and relevant. But I'm not sure what exactly to do, like it's up to me to put it into practice but I would feel better having more help to know what exactly, like being told what to do. I'm not sure about these, "how to become more 'optimalist'". Not sure where to start, how to go about it. Maybe like some actual ways you can do that, maybe a booklet? (Jessica, Y10).

This was a priority area for immediate action within the research design. It reflected the ideas of Bloom's hierarchy of educational learning objectives (1956); participants identifying this issue were at the cognitive stage of 'knowledge' and even 'comprehension', but did not yet feel able to 'apply'. This indicated further scaffolding was required for such individuals. Within the research design, it was possible to facilitate this. Additions to the staff guidance following discussion and participant suggestions included an A3 staffroom poster to remind staff of what they learned in the presentation and on their help sheet, and a case study research article reinforcing the link between *perfectionism* and suicide. Additions to the student guidance included a short booklet with concrete ideas for each of the 'ABC' strategies. The additions were well-received:

> With the workload that I have, would I have the time to read through the booklet, that's why I think the poster's great to put up in staffroom (James, T)
>
> Having the strategies in a separate booklet is a good idea. You get extra information without being swamped. You can read the leaflet and get more information if needed. The leaflet gives the initial…then follow up with the booklet then talk to someone (Brad, Y9).

A further concern was whether the guidance adequately met the needs of parents; of all participants, those missing from Phase Two were parents. Although the parents' feedback was positive, one point is notable:

> Sadly there must be many parents who act as described on p24 of your presentation (parental expectations and parental criticisms) but equally there must be many who don't (myself included I have to say!) (Emma^, P).

On reflection, more emphasis could be put in the parent guidance on the various functions of *perfectionism* (as highlighted in the staff guidance) as any perception of blame, although unintended, may present a major barrier to parents accessing and implementing the guidance and it may be that the three parents who did not take part in the second phase of the study may have experienced this. In order to effectively include parents, it is important to take a non-blaming approach.

Another point of note was the feedback from Joel^ (P) who highlighted the following:

> The subject line 'There is no such thing as perfect' is unprovable and misleading as I have seen things in my life which I would deem as Perfect. It all depends on the individual and their perception of what they qualify as Perfect. If you believe in a God who is supernatural and above all and transcends anything that is comparable to Him then this is perfection. The God of the Holy Bible makes this claim. Being a Christian and reading the Bible I too would without doubt agree with Gods claim that he is without flaw and is the absolute Perfection.

This brings to light the notion of religious beliefs which had not been considered, either within the literature review, design or guidance, yet may be important to consider for future work, particularly considering an eco-systemic framework. Individual perception is certainly an important point and reflects the spirit of the research, therefore this comment prompted reflection on the content of the guidance. A brief Internet exploration into a religious element uncovered an early interpretation of *perfectionism* as:

> the idea that it is possible for an individual to become free of sin in this life through religious conversion and will power (Noyes, 1832).

Along with Joel's personal religious world view, this spiritual interpretation may have also been reflected in Sage's (Y10) initial understanding of *perfectionism* as the belief that the world can be perfect and wanting to make it that way; her choice of Blob classroom *perfectionist* as a student comforting another differed dramatically from the majority's stereotype. This is a clear example of the different interpretations of a word which influence personal understanding and therefore behaviour. These participants therefore helped co-create with me a richer understanding of *perfectionism*.

5 Discussion

> I learned a lot! I thought *perfectionism* was a good thing originally and now I think it's better to be an 'optimalist' (Matt, Y9).

The overall aims of the research were to contribute to the knowledge on *perfectionism* in education by exploring the perspectives of a sample of UK secondary school students, parents and school staff, and to produce and provisionally evaluate guidance for these schools and families on how best to support the emotional wellbeing needs of students who may be high in *perfectionism*. The success of the research in achieving these aims is now discussed, with reference to the literature and findings. This includes a clear statement about the study's contribution to knowledge and limitations of the work. Of relevance here is a critical discussion of the chosen methodology of participatory action research. Future research possibilities and practical recommendations are also discussed, concluding with a reflexive account of the research process.

5.1 A discussion of the findings.

Phase One reflected the aim of exploring staff, parent and student perspectives on *perfectionism*, including *misconceptions*. The findings reflected the mixed literature regarding the dimensions, etiology and perceived benefits of *perfectionism*. On the whole, participants' beliefs about *perfectionism* largely mirrored the Shafran, Cooper and Fairburn (2002) definition in terms of the "determined pursuit of personally demanding, self-imposed standards" (p.778). However, participants appeared unaware of a key element of this definition, "the overdependence of self-evaluation". Participants' constructions therefore largely represented the dimensions of

perfectionism identified by Rice and Preusser (2002), with the omission of 'contingent self-esteem', more accurately capturing the dimensions of Frost and colleagues (1990), although with little acknowledgement of the role of parental expectations or criticism. There was some link with the dimensions of *perfectionism* identified by Hewitt and colleagues (2011), relating to more interpersonal dimensions and cognitive aspects, although a deeper understanding was also missing here in recognising the likelihood of concealment and nondisclosure of imperfection. This suggests assumptions are made about students high in *perfectionism* as able to cope and not requiring support, which may reinforce these students not seeking help when needed.

Participants were also largely unaware of another key element of the above definition, "despite adverse consequences", suggesting a gap in knowledge regarding the more negative aspects of *perfectionism*. One such example is the discussion of transition from secondary school to HE or the workplace; the majority of participants did not consider this an area of challenge for a student high in *perfectionism,* whereas the existing literature suggests this is a time of particular vulnerability for such students (e.g. Flett et al., 2008). Therefore it is unlikely that such students would receive any extra support around this time, which could perhaps be of benefit. Despite this lack of awareness of challenge, participants frequently discussed emotions of anxiety and stress relating to school, which are notably omitted from published self-rating scales; the focus within these is predominantly on thoughts and behaviours. The current research highlights a clear theme of emotion linked with *perfectionism* which perhaps deserves further attention in the literature, particularly amongst secondary school students who experience

social and academic pressures as part of their identity development. The more extreme mental health issues associated with *perfectionism* were markedly absent from many participants' awareness, highlighting another gap in knowledge, perhaps reflecting the lack of interest within UK media and literature.

Participants predominantly constructed *perfectionism* around the self-oriented sub-type, with limited recognition of the socially-prescribed or other-oriented categorisations which may have more significance for other members of the family and school community, particularly SPP for which there may be systemic interventions. This was also reflected in the etiological discussions, which largely omitted the influence of the environment and parenting, and showed no awareness of the theory of attachment and how this may relate to personality development. There was, however, some belief in intergenerational transmission and cognitive processes but a lack of clarity from most participants as to how one 'gets' *perfectionism* and what is likely to maintain it, showing no depth of awareness of the possible function *perfectionism* may serve.

Where participants showed some awareness of the underlying need communicated through *perfectionism*, ideas focused predominantly on a cognitive or neurological hypothesis, indicating, as in the existing literature, a somewhat medical model of the issue. There was a sense from the laddering questions that *perfectionism* was just about being the way someone likes things to be, rather than serving any deeper purpose. It may be that participants were unable to access any deeper understanding due to their own defence mechanisms surrounding *perfectionism,* or

this may just reflect a lack of knowledge and understanding of the issue. The value of the current research therefore is in bringing to greater awareness the construct of *perfectionism*, and challenging existing constructs, particularly relating to the social and affective hypotheses which support the introduction of the SEMH category of need.

Of particular relevance to educational psychology, there appeared to be a dominant construction of *perfectionism* similar to Slaney and colleagues' (1996) description of 'adaptive *perfectionists'* (those with elevated high standards and perceiving their high standards are being met), with the construction of 'non-*perfectionist'* as being considerably more negative than the description given by these authors and no clear recognition of 'maladaptive *perfectionists'*. Within this, there appeared to be confusion between a *perfectionist* and a 'healthy high-achiever', as indicated in the earlier literature. There was a hint that *perfectionists* may have unreasonably high standards, but no exploration within this of the notion of discrepancy between expectations and achievement (Accordino, Accordino and Slaney, 2000), since participants largely believed that *perfectionists* will attain what they expect and deserve. There was therefore a strong sense amongst the current participants that *perfectionism* is a valued attribute, reflecting the assertion of Bell and colleagues (2010) and perhaps explaining the lack of awareness of links with conditions such as ASC and ADHD, or issues such as school refusal. There was also limited awareness of the possible domains of *perfectionism* outside of academic achievement, suggesting that those students demonstrating *perfectionism* in areas such as relationships or leisure are likely to be overlooked and perhaps not reach the

attention of helpful professionals, who may be able to help their pursuits take a more balanced and healthy nature, perhaps benefitting their overall development.

Despite conflicting with Greenspon's (2000) notion that *perfectionism* is intersubjective rather than a 'within-child' problem, when discussing what might make things better or worse for a student high in *perfectionism*, participants identified external factors, rather than drawing upon personal resiliency factors such as self-efficacy (Chan, 2007) or locus of control (Arazzini and De George-Walker, 2014), or even more fixed characteristics such as age or gender. This suggests two potential problems. The first is that students high in *perfectionism* may be led to believe the problem is with them, as a person, which may have a detrimental effect on their sense of self-worth, perhaps further reinforcing their *perfectionism*. The second concern is that they may be led to believe the only way to change is through external means; they have no control over change for themselves. This sense of powerlessness may also serve to reinforce the *perfectionism*. This potential combination of a perceived criticised 'self' and a sense of powerlessness to change may be a key contributor to mental health problems for young people, these two elements relating strongly to anxiety and depression.

It was noteworthy that several parents and teachers reflected the current educational and political context in their discussions, with its possible link to the feelings of increased pressures amongst students. However, there was an important missing link within the eco-systemic model, reflecting a valuable area for EP intervention. Participants did not acknowledge the systemic level between the wider political and

media influence and the effect on individual students; they appeared unaware of the impact of the pressures on themselves as adults around the young person and their subsequent behaviour towards these students.

Finally, supporting the earlier conjecture that 'high-achieving' schools may overlook *perfectionist* students, staff universally linked *perfectionism* with high achievement and intelligence, along with the observation that these students' stress levels are hard to change and in fact perhaps contribute to their success, as discussed by Roedell (1984) for 'gifted children'. This may present the most significant barrier to changing behaviour and therefore perhaps the most powerful reinforcement for *perfectionism* in students. This is where an EP could utilise their substantial skill-base, for example using PCP and a consultation approach to help encourage shifts in perspective amongst the young person and adults around them.

5.2 A discussion of the methods.

Considering the earlier arguments against quantitative measures of *perfectionism* and the dangers of self-rating, it was of interest to explore whether a broader categorisation system could offer any practical use to schools and EPs, by determining the correlation between different participants' ratings of a student's *perfectionism*. However, opinions on 'level' of *perfectionism* varied between staff, parents and students, and deeper exploration found their constructs for *perfectionism* differed in ways that prevented comparison of their 'level' as a sole measure, supporting the argument against published scales. The use of pyramiding as a tool to elicit specific behaviours was a more helpful approach to ensure similar

factors were being compared, with the amalgamation of published scales into 13 factors a helpful guide for my use. Mirroring the earlier literature, prevalence of *perfectionism* within UK secondary school students is difficult to ascertain. In agreement with Flett and Hewitt (2014; p.899) that *perfectionism* is "highly prevalent amongst children and adolescents", the current study suggested high levels of *perfectionism* for five of the 17 students interviewed, representing a similar proportion to the international prevalence figures reported by Chan (2009) and Rice, Ashby and Gilman (2011). Using the descriptor and its opposite was helpful to identify the barriers to change for students high in *perfectionism*. However the current study differed from the work of Szymanski (2011) in that helping participants see the 'middle-ground' of this scale was not considered to be the most useful intervention, or even appropriate. Instead, identifying conflicts in these descriptors was capitalised upon by providing participants with a new word to capture *all* their valued attributes and remove the conflict of their *perfectionist*-not *perfectionist* constructs.

The reluctance (or lack of capacity) of students high in *perfectionism* to self-rate accurately may threaten their own identified 'level', however it was notable in the current study that the interview approach facilitated the building of rapport and a safe environment in which participants universally felt able to disclose less socially desirable aspects of the self. Perhaps the situation provided an opportunity in which no specific performance or achievement was necessary and supports the building of a therapeutic relationship for SEMH work, as highlighted in the following quotation relating to nurture groups:

> The essence of any therapeutic intervention is holding the client in a safe relationship while helping them to understand themselves and to find better ways of being and behaving. This, in the safe, normalising setting of mainstream school (Bennathan, Boxall and Colley, 1998, p.19).

It was also of interest to determine whether the research approach was sufficient for identifying student need relating to *perfectionism*, and which aspects were the most helpful for this. This relates to the argument regarding the purpose of measurement scales and the need to consider the heterogeneity of students high in *perfectionism,* as discussed by Flett and Hewitt (2014). The combination of information-gathering methods provided a broad, rich perspective on individual students' needs, with some aspects more useful than others. For example, the dynamic assessment activity was particularly helpful to observe and identify possible *perfectionism* relating to task performance or social expectations, however could have offered even more information had the dynamic (mediation) element been pursued, had time not been a consideration. The triadic elicitation task revealed clear differences between participants in terms of their flexible and dynamic thinking and the use of laddering in discussion helped to prompt hypotheses about the function of the *perfectionism*. However, as previously discussed, this required both a readiness to explore more personal constructs, and also the capacity for a high level of insight, which were not always evident. It is notable that the majority of the cases provided above under each hypothesised function of *perfectionism* were those participants for whom I was able to interview the student, their parent and their teacher, providing rich triangulation of data to inform the hypothesis. It is for these reasons that a variety of assessment methods are recommended to identify student need.

Another important issue to discuss within the methods for this phase is the assessment of students in terms of *perfectionism* and 'optimalism'. Adopting positive

psychology, the assessment of students merely in undesirable qualities, as in *perfectionism*, would not be conducive for creative and hopeful thinking about intervention possibilities. Instead of saying what we do not want students to be, we can describe what we *do* want them to be; importantly this is *not* the opposite of *perfectionist* as constructed by the majority of the study's participants. Considering students' 'level' of 'optimalism' instead provided a helpful balance for the *perfectionism* characteristics, in a similar way to the 'positive' developmental and 'negative' diagnostic criteria in the Boxall Profile (Bennathan, Boxall and Colley, 1998). It allowed identification of students of particular concern due to a high level of *perfectionism* qualities, but also of those students particularly low in 'optimalism' qualities. It also allowed reflection on those students for whom one mediates the other; 'optimalism' may offer some form of protection against *perfectionism* (for example, Sage^ and Isabelle, Y10) and conversely, *perfectionism* may prevent 'optimalism' showing its full benefits (for example, Matt and Harriet^, Y9).

It may be of particular note that there were more students identified as high in *perfectionism* than in 'optimalism' in the study, and offering some support to Jaradat's (2013) assertion that girls are significantly more *perfectionist* than boys, these were all female. Future work could explore this further. Students high in 'optimalism' could perhaps be involved in supporting change for those students high in *perfectionism*. Another notable point is that the perception of parental support and encouragement was explicitly referenced by just one student in the study; Isabelle, supporting her 'optimalistic' outlook. Providing some support to Neumeister's (2003, 2004) findings that students perceive parental pressures to be causal to *perfectionism*, each of the students high in *perfectionism* mentioned parents in a less

positive way. Also supporting Låftman, Almquist and Östberg (2013), these students also referenced comparison with peers or siblings, reflecting perhaps an indirect attempt to meet adult expectations. This has real significance when considering systemic intervention for those high in SPP. The EP has a valuable role to play here in bringing together the young person with their key adults, in order to open communication and explore ways of relating to one another to positively change perceptions.

To conclude this section, what 'optimalism' provides is a way to identify need and set targets based upon where we want students to be, in combination with identifying what we want them to move away from (aspects of *perfectionism*). This supports Flett and Hewitt's (2014) ideal prevention programme, including the involvement of family, and could be a helpful approach for UK schools. It is reiterated at this point, in accordance with Parker (2005, 2007), that such models merely provide a basis from which to develop understanding further, rather than hoping to categorise people neatly.

5.3 A discussion of the explorative element.

Phase Two reflected the aim of producing and provisionally evaluating guidance for schools and families to support students high in *perfectionism*. Exploring 'what works' for challenging *perfectionism* was achieved through synthesising research literature, the practical experiences and training of professionals, the ideas of participants and my own application of psychological theory.

The findings revealed a lack of evidence-base for *perfectionism* interventions in secondary school students. The guidance was therefore based upon an amalgamation of the limited information available. The findings also suggested that the primary means of intervention could be through CBT approaches, with acknowledgement of the individual's stage of change as to their readiness to engage therapeutically. Considering this, the guidance for students and parents was largely psychoeducational, encouraging positive action as advocated by Steele and colleagues (2013). More systemic approaches were indicated by the professional participants, highlighting their popularity in 'real-world' practice yet still requiring a strong evidence-base to support their use. Promoting a 'growth mindset' for all students was mentioned by just one staff member, with more reactive approaches described by others, such as anxiety management groups. The 'core competencies' identified by Guerra and Bradshaw (2008) were not considered by any participants. Staff had received no prior training on *perfectionism* yet all felt they and colleagues could benefit from in-service training (INSET) relating to this area. Guidance for staff therefore encompassed psychoeducation and intervention ideas, including encouraging home-school relationships.

Within the production of guidance, ideas for dissemination were explored and synthesised with the needs and wants of participants, using practical experiences from practicing EPs to achieve a sound balance. A 'best-fit' mixture of staff presentation, more in-depth reading materials and 'quick reference' guides provided a good balance of depth and accessibility for most participants. Concern remained as to whether the guidance would reach those who could most benefit. It was hoped that the PAR approach would empower schools to take responsibility for this.

However future research is required to ascertain whether this hope was achieved and to explore further means of supporting vulnerable students effectively.

5.4 A discussion of the evaluative element.

Provisionally evaluating the guidance was important so that amendments could be made to best meet the needs of participants. Since the guidance was based upon identified participant wants and needs, it was expected that participants would be largely satisfied with what had been produced. This was achieved in the majority of cases. Helpful suggestions were made by a number of participants, relating to relatively minor amendments, which were easily made to produce a final resource with which participants were pleased, and most importantly, empowered through a genuinely collaborative approach in which understanding was co-produced.

An area of some concern was the response of parents. Firstly, three parents did not take part in Phase Two of the research, representing a third of this participant group. I was unable to ascertain a reason for this; they did not actively refuse to take part, rather did not reply to an e-mail, so it is unclear whether they intentionally missed this part of the research or not. On reflection, seeking an alternative means of contact at the beginning of the research could have been valuable here. One parent who did respond (Emma), although pleased with the final product, may have felt slightly defensive about her possible role in her daughter's *perfectionism*. This was unintended, and on reflection perhaps further clarification could have been included in the parent presentation to highlight the various functions and etiologies of *perfectionism*. However, considering this further, this may perhaps have been a

beneficial occurrence; defensiveness perhaps indicates an underlying sense of guilt, shame or responsibility. This parent notably commented that she had gained personally from the experience, mentioning a helpful discussion she had been able to initiate with her daughter following the research interview. Her daughter had talked in her own interview about the responses of her parents to her achievements so this hypothesis seems likely. Perhaps a little defensiveness is a sign of the development of early self-awareness and therefore could be considered a positive element within instigating change.

A more concerning response was from Joel^; a parent who self-identified both himself and his daughter as being 'tormented' by *perfectionism*. Within his evaluation he demonstrated another cognitive error; that of the Heaven's reward fallacy. Although this had not arisen in his initial interview, it became clear during the evaluation phase that a strong belief in God and the notion of achievable perfection could act as a barrier for some individuals to change. For Joel^, the characteristics attributed to successful learners were indistinguishable from the notion of a *perfectionist*. For a parent with such strong, engrained beliefs, a presentation or leaflet is clearly insufficient to alter *misconceptions*. For these parents, discussions with the EP might be beneficial to reframe the way they conceive behaviours within their religious beliefs, respecting their individual ideas about 'sin' and 'reward' yet helping them move towards a more compassionate understanding of their child in light of research on child development and emotional wellbeing, in a way that acknowledges their values.

A moving e-mail following the evaluation phase from a parent, Jane^, described how she had benefitted personally from the guidance following a recent accident which had left her requiring help from others. Again this highlights a possible development in self-awareness amongst parents that, following a social learning model, could be highly beneficial in terms of their subsequent behaviour and means of relating to their children so that negative familial patterns do not persist.

5.5 The original contribution to knowledge

The study provides interpretivist data within an almost exclusively positivist area. This provides a unique perspective into the individual thoughts and feelings of a sample of Year 9 and 10 students, parents and staff relating to the construct of *perfectionism*, including how individuals relate their construct to themselves and others in terms of 'level' of *perfectionism*. This is important in hypothesising about the function of *perfectionism* for students and potential reinforcement in their environment, contributing the notion of behaviour as a form of communication to the existing literature. The research also contributes a new UK, secondary-school based exploration of *perfectionism,* and involves in this exploration the contributions of a range of professionals to support multi-agency collaboration.

Most significantly, the study liberates the voices of students high in *perfectionism*, a previously invisible vulnerable group within schools. The critical emancipatory approach is highly original within this particular field of research and opens up significant possibilities for future work. This is needed, due to students high in *perfectionism* having the potential to be, as EP John described, like runaway trains

at risk of going off the tracks. The final contribution to knowledge is the collaboratively-produced guidance for schools and families specifically based on a UK, high-achieving secondary school context, and provisional evaluation of this amongst a sample of students, staff and parents. This provides a unique package of support for UK schools and families to address the current priority of raising standards in mental health for all students, and partly involves participants in their own process of change.

Perfectionism has traditionally been viewed as challenging to overcome. It may be that co-producing understanding of an individual's world is key to facilitating positive change, as it provides the opportunity for the individual to feel heard and valued, and to explore their own identity in order to develop self-awareness and the motivation to change towards a more 'optimalist' worldview. The current research provides a springboard for further interpretivist research into practice and the deconstruction of the *perfectionist* stereotype.

5.6 Limitations

Within the spirit of 'optimalism', the limitations of the research are now explored critically yet compassionately, with a view to identifying opportunities for future improvement. Each aspect of the research is discussed in turn.

The research aims. The first aim of the work was perhaps a little broad; exploring the construct of *perfectionism* could have encompassed an entire research

project due to the large amount of information this covers and the lack of interpretivist literature on which to base the study. This resulted in a mass of data to condense into the research questions and although there was an attempt to focus on the function of *perfectionism* and awareness of risk, it perhaps would have been beneficial to have more time with fewer participants to explore this in even greater depth, rather than gaining the overall knowledge and understanding of a larger sample of participants, which restricted the time provided for each individual and produced a large amount of data at a reasonably rich level.

Conversely, the second aim may have been a little too specific in nature; it made the assumption that guidance was both wanted and needed. On this occasion, it was both. However, in future, the second aim of the study may have to be more explicitly guided by the findings of such an exploratory first phase, rather than knowledge discussed in the Introduction. Arguably, it was careful interpretation of the existing knowledge that meant guidance would be needed, and skilled interviewing which ensured guidance was wanted. Due to the limited evidence-base and collaboration with multiple participants, the production of guidance was a lengthy process and may have benefitted from a longer phase of drafting before evaluation, however participants were universally pleased with the guidance and part of this may have been their direct contributions to its formation and edit. Including an element of evaluation in the second aim therefore added an important dimension to the study as it justified the production of guidance, as well as completing the PAR cycle.

Literature review. The review covered a wide range of literature, from many professional areas and across many journals. It is contemporary yet acknowledges the older research on which the area is based. There is little discussion, however, of the philosophical or psychological underpinnings of personality-based research; this was deemed inappropriate within the specified word limit but would form an interesting background to the discussion of the topic. Another limitation of the literature review is in the specific focus on literature relating to the word *perfectionism*. It may have been beneficial to unpick *perfectionism* at this stage and explore literature relating to each of the identified dimensions, to uncover any valuable research into aspects of *perfectionism,* however then it would have to be acknowledged that the findings may not be relevant to someone more aptly described as *perfectionist*. This highlights the importance of language and also the findings of Morris and Lomax (2014) that unless *perfectionism* is specifically targeted, any gains in anxiety or depression management, for example, through associated interventions will be quickly lost.

Another limitation of the research is partly one of its strengths; there was a rich selection of psychological theory consulted to produce the guidance, though this was not recounted in depth due to limitations in space. For example, a notable idea emerging in Phase One was the comparison of *perfectionism* with addiction. The literature review did not address this area of research which may have contributed further to the discussion.

Methodology. The PAR approach was compromised in a number of respects. The participants were not able to be termed ‘co-researchers’ in the true sense of the word, since all aspects of the research process were under my control as researcher; although participants contributed integral knowledge and understanding to the development of the guidance, the design and analysis at all points was determined by me rather than decision-making power being collaborative. This was due to time restrictions and based somewhat on the existing literature; the current study has helped to shift the significantly scientific research base slightly towards a more interpretivist, although not truly PAR approach. Aspects of PAR adhered to included building on existing strengths and resources within the community and the recognition of a common identity between participants. The study successfully integrated knowledge and action to mutually benefit all involved, within a cyclical and iterative process resulting in a respectful and understandable form of dissemination.

Emancipatory research seeks to empower the subjects of social inquiry (Letherby, 2006). The nature of PAR is such that participants feel actively involved in their process of change, and a real difference can be made on a small-scale. This recognises the multi-faceted nature of the social world and the desire to understand and improve the world by changing it (Baum, MacDougall and Smith, 2006). Another consideration here is that not all participants within the research community could have been assumed to want things to change, or to contribute to any changes. This was perhaps an oversight of the research, again making the assumption that change was necessary and would be wanted. This belief was based upon the critical emancipatory paradigm that there exists an invisible vulnerable group for whom a

voice is needed, and that research has the power to liberate that voice. The issue of power is a significant one; to empower someone, one must give away power, therefore even within the critical emancipatory approach, there exist necessary power imbalances. However, Labonte (1990) conceptualised empowerment as the shifting of power relations between people and Foucault (1993) argued liberty is a practice rather than a commodity to be passed on. What the current research may have done is give participants an experience of a step towards a feeling of emancipation, through carrying out the research in a way which fostered maximum collaboration, for example through the participatory design and evaluation of guidance. Even those participants who were content with their current situation had the opportunity to have their views heard and to collaborate with the direction of the research, engaging in participatory self-reflection. It was these participants who demonstrated an element of pride in *perfectionism* yet conflict around their understanding of success and happiness who perhaps contributed most significantly to the direction of the research, through the co-creation of their self-knowledge and the identified need for a new descriptor. It was through a partially collaborative PAR approach that the study's journey evolved into something of practical application for the communities involved. This simultaneous action and reflection upon action is rooted in Freire's (1972) musings on epistemology:

> Reflection without action is sheer verbalism or armchair revolution and action without reflection is pure activism, or action for action's sake.

The 'transformative power' (Baum, MacDougall and Smith, 2006; p.856) of PAR was evident through participant comments, however the breadth and depth of such change is unknown and could perhaps have been more substantial had a true PAR approach been followed. The models proposed within the current research were done so with pragmatic intent in agreement with Parker (2007) that models do not

accurately capture human experience as human nature itself changes as people reflect on who they are and who they may become. In further agreement with Parker (2007) and supporting the need to provide *something* of immediate application for participants, any attempt to 'fix people in place' fails in such a way that something productive emerges from it if we do something different. It is this use of psychology that formed the basis for the research and was achieved through interview and guidance.

A self-selecting group emerged in the current research, those who expressed gratitude and further interest in the study. It is these participants I would argue have experienced the greatest sense of emancipation through the research and who it is hoped have experienced the necessary level of empowerment to improve the situation of themselves or others high in *perfectionism*. Knowledge is power, but so too is the use of skills to uncover and reveal knowledge in others. Both elements were employed sensitively, however it is acknowledged that any efforts to liberate which are themselves based upon differences in power through whatever form, may in their own way perpetuate relations of dominance (Humphries, 1997). This is an issue facing all critical emancipatory work and not limited to the current study.

It is imperative that within interpretivist research, and perhaps the critical emancipatory philosophy in particular, the researcher must reflect throughout the process and ensure the integrity of the research is maintained (rather than following one's own agenda). Keeping a reflexive research journal and frequent communication with academic, research and pastoral supervisors ensured this was

the case. A more theoretical approach could have been applied, such as narrative enquiry, ethnography or even case study design, yet the essence of the research would have been lost through these means. So too would a more positivist approach utilising experimental design or large-scale surveys; although this would arguably represent a less value-laden and more coherent and orderly process (Letherby, 2006), connection with and empowerment of individual participants would be lost and that was a real strength of the current research, not to mention strongly rooted in personal values. PAR was therefore entirely appropriate to begin the proactive process of awareness-raising and prompting positive change on behalf of this group of students who may be unintentionally marginalised. PAR can be considered 'time-consuming and unpredictable' (Baum, MacDougall and Smith, 2006; 855) therefore further work in the area utilising this approach may be challenging to commission, despite its ability to bring about real change to quality of life.

Sample selection. This may be a more problematic limitation of the study. At a school-level, it was evident that participating in research was a highly variable priority across schools. As a result, of the eight schools approached, four felt unable to participate in the research. This is of note when considering the demographics of the schools involved; presumably those taking part saw the value of a) research, b) the emotional wellbeing of their students and c) guidance from an external professional to support their work. This, as evident from the sample selection, is not representative of all secondary schools. It is of interest within itself that some schools felt time away from studying would be detrimental. Whether this was for the individual student, the school results or their personal reputation was unexplored. It does however reinforce the premise of the current work and prompts questions as to

how one can access such schools in which students high in *perfectionism* may particularly benefit from the research.

Sampling from four different schools was purposive in order to gather a range of perspectives; focusing on one school would have severely limited the conclusions of the research. Identifying schools in different counties was also purposive, in order that conclusions again were less limited. However, despite the small sample, there were emerging differences between the boys' school and the other three schools, which could be hypothesised as being a result of gender or geography (or both). However, this is not an issue in the current study as it did not set out to generalise across these factors, although a notable limitation may be the absence of male students in the South-West/co-educational samples. All students were considered high-achieving; it is acknowledged that findings may be different for less high-achieving students.

On an individual participant level, the sampling required the involvement of staff to circulate information and then select from the respondents. This results in a highly specific sample of participants who are a) *willing* to take part in research b) have parental *permission* to take part in research, and c) are considered *appropriate* to take part in research by school. It also involves the judgment of staff as to who to select. This is a minority of secondary school students, as predicted and indicated by the numbers in the study. There was an attempt to interview six students, four parents and two staff members at each setting in order to gather a wide range of perspectives. However, the numbers were a little smaller, reflecting an absence of

the above three criteria and therefore not providing a sample that is representative of the population. An alternative and more optimistic way of viewing this is that those participants who took part were motivated by the nature of the study and had information of value to contribute, therefore were the best sample for the research paradigm. This was apparent in the majority of participants having direct experience of *perfectionism* and a vested interest in the guidance. An important consideration here is whether a participant's *perfectionism* level may affect their participation in research; it was extremely valuable to create a warm and trusting environment in which rapport was central and expectations explicit, to facilitate the process without *perfectionism* presenting a barrier. The sample selection was one respect in which PAR was compromised; it may have been valuable to take an approach such as holding an assembly and encouraging any member of the school community to take part in the research, rather than having the powerful institution of the school staff decide who would participate. The 'unheard' sector within *perfectionism* research would still have been accessed this way, however the ongoing problem of the most marginalised group (those students high in *perfectionism*) not taking part could persist. The current study attempted to strike a balance, yet in doing so unwittingly perpetuated the power imbalance between the community and those in power, reflecting Parker's (2005) critique of action research as naturally hindered by its institutional base.

Data collection. Data collection was carried out with great care to ensure participants had a positive interview experience. However since it was unclear why three parents did not continue with the research, there is always the possibility that these parents did not enjoy the experience or feel they could benefit from continuing

further. One limitation was in the practicalities of timing in that one or two interviews were shorter than would have been preferred due to the timings of the school day, although sufficient data was gathered from all participants, with the option given to contact me with further thoughts. Every attempt was made to show genuine acceptance of participants' standpoint, in order to foster their self-confidence in disclosure. This could be enhanced further by a more longitudinal approach in which a truly trusting relationship could be built up between myself as researcher and the participants. Having more time would also allow the opportunity for participants to be more involved in the design and analysis processes so that they are truly 'co-researchers'. This would strengthen the PAR approach. Another consideration here is the location of the interviews. If school is considered a powerful institution, it is unlikely perhaps that participants feel completely at ease to express opinions discordant with the dominant culture. Carrying out interviews instead at participants' homes was discussed as an option with school contacts in the early stages of the research and notably dismissed, with school as a location being considered more convenient. It is now on reflection that I realise this decision, again made by those in power, actually disempowers the participants. It remains a challenge within this type of research how to attain access to the 'marginalised group' when needing to ensure collaboration with those in power for continued involvement in the study. Negotiating with school contacts was a delicate and considered process with compromises needing to be made in order for the research to progress. It is decisions such as this which compromise the PAR approach, however, and I have therefore learned a lot from my first participatory research study.

Interviews were recorded and immediately transcribed, with reflexive notes recorded in a journal. This approach was highly effective for gaining familiarity with the data. The other limitation here was in the volume of data collected; all elements were considered helpful to answer the research questions but on reflection perhaps a smaller sample could have allowed a more manageable amount of data. A revised design may be holding an initial brief 'screening' interview with all participants to ascertain approximate levels of *perfectionism* (perhaps employing just the initial drawing activity which may help to identify cognitive and affective strengths and needs), then focusing on those participants who appear either particularly high in *perfectionism* or 'optimalism' to continue with a more in-depth interview. However, this would significantly change the focus of the research and it was the intention of the current study to ascertain the constructs of *perfectionism* of a sample of Year 9 and 10 students, staff and parents, not a sample of students, parents and staff high in *perfectionism*. Reflection on the framework designed to gain approximate *perfectionism* and 'optimalism' ratings reveals an unconsidered complexity; the degree to which participants displayed each attribute. This raises the question of whether a participant very high in one or two attributes and low in all others would be considered less of a *perfectionist* or 'optimalist' than someone scoring medium to high in all. This presents an area for future work in using the bipolar scale designed (and well-received by students) to determine severity of attributes. For the current study, the framework was considered 'good enough'.

Giving participants the option to e-mail their feedback in Phase Two was designed to promote greater honesty in their evaluations, although missed the sense of interaction from personal feedback. It was useful to make evaluation expectations

clear, for example saying it was okay for participants to be critical; this is likely to have opened opportunities for candid feedback, allowing a more balanced and valid evaluation of the guidance.

Ethical issues. The ethical issues of the research became more apparent as the study progressed. For example, the self-identification of a teacher, James, as *perfectionist* had to be considered carefully in determining what level of detail to include in the staff guidance relating to discussing risks associated with *perfectionism*, particularly suicide. For this reason, a 'health warning' was included on this aspect of the guidance, and this staff member was provided with his own personal card, leaflet and self-help book recommendations to ensure there was a sense of ongoing support for him as well as the students. This had not been planned in the ethical considerations, but was managed in a way that maintained high ethical standards.

I was also keen for the parent Joel^, who had self-identified as high in *perfectionism* and 'tormented' by it, to have ways forward following the research. For the evaluation of the guidance, we engaged in e-mail conversation about the implications and his interpretations, to again ensure he perceived positive options. Suicide was omitted from parent and student guidance as there was not enough 'containment' within the study to leave these participants with this knowledge, particularly since many self-identified as high in *perfectionism*. It was felt to be an important element within the staff guidance to raise motivation to work with these students, who may appear to be coping well and so may not have previously attracted staff attention. This was

echoed by Claire, who requested even more emphasis on this negative outcome in order to gain staff support.

The ethical issues around the use of PCP had been fully considered; a 'safe' and containing environment was provided, in which I endeavoured to help participants feel relaxed and in control. The self-disclosure and continued involvement in the research of most participants reflects this. On one occasion, a parent became tearful as she reflected on her construct for 'not successful', relating it to herself, but appreciated the opportunity to express this and was noticeably more open in subsequent discussions. The issue of personal values and self-doubt had to be carefully considered in producing the guidance, since it became apparent throughout Phase One that many participants not only self-identified as *perfectionists*, but took pride in this self-image. Therefore the guidance required the sensitive reframing of the positive qualities they identified being more accurately captured under the heading of 'optimalist', with recognition and emphasis on the negative qualities to which they had alluded being more accurately descriptive of a *perfectionist*. This was thought to provide a positive option within which to conceptualise their self-image, based upon their valued attributes and moving away from the cognitions and behaviours which may put them at risk for undesirable outcomes. This approach truly respected the autonomy of the individuals by recognising and utilising their unique values, attitudes and beliefs within the application of psychology.

An ethical issue which perhaps could have been addressed more fully is the research approach for those participants very high in *perfectionism*. For example,

through discussion with Julia (T) it became apparent that the opening drawing activity would be unsuitable for Jessica (Y10), who experienced great difficulty with recording for fear of making mistakes. To ask her to do the opening activity would have been unethical and it was deemed unnecessary given this background information. Of further relevance is Julia's request that Jessica and Grace^ (Y10) be interviewed together, as the girls' social anxiety may prevent them interacting with a stranger alone. For this reason, Grace^ also did not do the opening activity. These participants' answers may have influenced one another, however it was noted during their interview that both girls appeared able to speak freely and independently of one another, providing differing views at times and ultimately finding solidarity in one another through hearing about each other's experiences. Jessica noted:

> It's nice to know someone else feels like this, like, I knew you from around school but I didn't know you felt like me as such,

to which Grace^ agreed, hence this was ultimately viewed as a positive element of the research rather than a potential limitation. This prompted reflection on a comment by French and Swain (1997) that:

> The very process of creating a psychologically safe environment for research participants, during an interview for example, is also potentially exploitative (p.27).

This particular situation helped me keep in mind the purpose of PAR and the need for sensitive co-creation of self-awareness with participants, putting their wellbeing at the forefront of any actions. This included ensuring participants were aware of their right to withdraw at any time and attempting to make it feel 'safe' to do so.

A further ethical consideration is the conclusion of this research; the guidance evaluation provided a form of review for the initial contact with participants, but I was left feeling compelled to follow-up the participants' use of the guidance on a more

long-term basis. This may be both a flaw and strength of the current research design; it leaves the situation open for future research, but it also results in a personal feeling of incompletion; as an EP I could return to schools and 'check-in' with students, families and staff, having continual involvement as necessary to ensure interventions are implemented effectively and positive outcomes achieved. The research world differs in this respect, requiring closure and boundaries on the relationships developed during the research process. This was made clear during the study and an attempt made to make schools self-sufficient to implement the guidance. The social media page created will continue to be updated, providing a minimal form of ongoing contact where needed.

Data analysis. This was highly involved due to the large amount of rich information. I have provided thorough information of the qualitative procedures used, with an appropriate sample of raw data included in the appendices. The nature of the research meant limited quantitative analysis was necessary or appropriate, therefore only basic quantitative analyses were performed. A truly PAR approach would have included participants in this aspect of the research, however time restrictions compromised this opportunity.

Validity and reliability. The findings are not generalisable to settings not classed as 'high-achieving', or even to other settings and samples not immediately involved in the study. Employing four settings across the UK helped to contribute somewhat to the (tentative) generalisability of the study, however it is important to acknowledge that the specific recommendations are based upon the current

research and largely shaped by its participants so may not be applicable to other settings and individuals. ‘High-achieving’ schools were purposefully selected due to the link in the literature between *perfectionism* and high-achievers. However, reflecting the recent discussion by Bould (2016), it is not clear whether differences in mental health amongst secondary school students exist because schools themselves are different, or because different types of individuals attend different schools. The current research cautiously maintains this ‘chicken and egg’ situation, taking a more humanist focus instead on improving the current situation rather than seeking to attribute causality to either institutions or individuals.

The amalgamation of the published rating scales into a framework for observation is clearly not an evidence-based decision but rather a practical tool for the current research. It is therefore not reliable or valid as a measure of *perfectionism* (nor of ‘optimalism’), though was felt to be appropriate as a baseline in the current work, since measurement was not a key focus. It would be fair to acknowledge that the current work is based on extremely sparse evidence, specifically relating to UK secondary school students. The data is valid and reliable as it applies to the sample in the current study, using transparent methodology. The findings meet requirements for research at thesis level as they are original, significant, rigorous, relevant to psychology and cited within current literature.

5.7 Practical recommendations

Within the research paradigm, practical recommendations were made as part of the PAR process for the participants involved, forming the distributed guidance.

Considering the research more generally, it is recommended that schools develop their understanding of *perfectionism* and awareness of the potential risks associated with related thoughts, feelings and behaviours, particularly when construed as being valuable or even essential for success, and something one will grow out of in time. The literature suggests this is not likely to be the case. Practically, schools should identify those students high in *perfectionism* and map out their provision to meet these students' needs. Ideally, schools should foster a 'growth mindset' and develop 'optimalism' within all their students, and challenge *misconceptions* about *perfectionism* in both students and parents, for example as trialled by Oxford High School for Girls. The EP can be a valuable resource here and may be able to advise on individual and systemic interventions to support these students. This reflects DiPrima and colleagues' (2011) discussion of the school psychologist assessing the 'maladaptiveness' of *perfectionism* through behavioural observations and interviews.

Practical recommendations for EPs include developing our own awareness and understanding of *perfectionism* so that we are vigilant to early signs of potential problems arising from this pattern of thoughts, within staff and parents in addition to students. This would enable interventions to be quickly put in place so that students' needs are met effectively, targeting the root of the problem rather than focusing on more 'surface' issues, for example through Consultation to reframe beliefs and attitudes. The use of dynamic assessment and PCP can provide a helpful glimpse into student cognitions, and, when combined with parent and staff discussion, can contribute to an accurate formulation of student needs.

Broader recommendations include the media making links between *perfectionism* and negative outcomes more explicit to raise public awareness, increased funding and guidance for schools to address mental health and emotional wellbeing at an earlier level so that *perfectionism* may not develop as a coping mechanism, and political leaders refraining from advocating the 'Tiger Mother' approach to social policy.

5.8 Future work

The above limitations and research as a whole suggest clear possibilities for further work in the area. The main idea arising is evaluating the guidance application and making further revisions as necessary. Other suggestions for future work include exploring *perfectionism* within different cultural situations, particularly considering *perfectionism* as a contagion, as it may be that in certain cultural situations, *perfectionism* could be conceptualised as a group reaction rather than something affecting individuals. This reflects the recent finding by Bould (2016) regarding eating disorders amongst female friendship groups. Repeating the study with schools not considered 'high-achieving' could help build understanding of *perfectionism* constructs across schools in general, making comparisons between gender, age and school type to explore at what point *perfectionism* may become evident and for whom, and how parents and teachers of younger students, different genders or different schools may perceive such behaviours. For validity, much larger samples are required for these correlations. The current research did not explore a cultural dimension relating to the *Parenting* stereotypes; future work could specifically employ participants from such cultural backgrounds to explore their constructs.

The literature would benefit from greater exploration into the function of *perfectionism* in order to more precisely tailor intervention, perhaps through observational studies or an ethnographic approach in which the researcher becomes part of a staff team or intervention group. This could also involve a case study design in which participants identified (and self-identifying) as high in *perfectionism* could explore with the researcher their thoughts, feelings and behaviours in more depth, to provide an even richer interpretative account of UK student *perfectionism*. This may result in a helpful guide for EP work. Taking a positive psychology angle, 'optimalism' could be the focus of investigation, perhaps exploring related thoughts, feelings and behaviours in students and staff and considering how to develop this worldview in others. Again, this may result in a helpful 'tool' for EPs and schools. Reflecting the current literature, a more experimental design could be used, employing pre- and post-intervention rating scales with a school staff-led intervention group, supported by an EP. However this contrasting approach risks overlooking the individual meanings made by participants. Any research with students high in *perfectionism* should endeavour to ensure a safe and predictable environment in which *perfectionism* is less likely to present a barrier to effective research, and the research does not put emotional wellbeing at risk.

5.9 A reflexive account of the research process

An emancipatory intent does not guarantee an emancipatory outcome (Acker, Barry and Essevold, 1983). Self-reflexivity was vital throughout the study to recognise my own complicity in what I critiqued, yet ensure such reflections avoided self-indulgence which may have compromised the desired purpose of the research

(Humphries, 1997). I now discuss my personal and professional reactions to the research field and participants, based upon my research journal reflections and discussions with supervisors. This recognises the tensions and contradictions in my practice, concluding with my final thoughts from the research field.

Reflections on the research based upon my personal and professional journey. My first reflection takes a personal note, and relates to the opening chapter on my research journey. I recall from school those students in the lowest set were excluded from the social echelons and treated differently by staff; this memory was triggered by a comment from Isabelle (Y10):

> I'm in the lowest class for everything in school, and it's really annoying and nobody…I kind of think of myself as not…I shouldn't be in the lowest class.

It is significant to note that in a non-selective school, Isabelle would be amongst the more average and higher achievers, yet in her current school was made to feel as though she was a 'lower achiever'. This made me reflect on her model of teaching and learning, and her identity within education. I wonder to what extent attending a selective school promotes or maintains *perfectionism* as a coping mechanism for anxiety in situations like these. It would be of interest to follow such students later in life to compare experiences and sense of self, as compared with academically-comparable students in non-selective schools. Of course, as already discussed, the type of student (and relatedly, family) who attend selective schools is arguably different from those who do not, rendering correlational studies, no matter how longitudinal, challenging to interpret.

Secondly, although there were conflicting negative associations for Claire (T) with 'non-*perfectionists'*, her following words regarding the positive elements and the

purpose of school strongly resonated with me, making me wonder how things could be for students high in *perfectionism* if more teachers embodied the values of high standards, yet a firm grasp on the skills needed to manage the realities of life's challenges:

> A 'non-*perfectionist'* will take a risk and "go hang! If it goes wrong, it's fun!" They're more spirited, physically relaxed…School is to enrich, to enlighten, to find oneself to a degree…from a student point of view "who am I?" - to experiment. My teacher told me at school it was to teach you to get around the rules for future life!

This made me reflect upon the nature of schooling and life as being for *living*, distinct from merely surviving, and what *living* actually means. This reflects Maslow's hierarchy of human motivation (1970) and the positive psychology movement towards the goal of self-actualisation. Of course, lower level needs must be met before this can be achieved, and it may be that *perfectionism* reflects unmet need at a more basic survival, belonging or self-esteem level. In this sense, a 'non-*perfectionist'* could be conceptualised as a student whose more basic needs have been met. However, reflecting the complexity of the area, a 'non-*perfectionist'* may equally have unmet needs, but these are being communicated through different ('non-*perfectionist'*) behaviours. This supports an individualised rather than blanket approach to intervention, making no assumptions about student need. Claire described her approach within the classroom as follows:

> I do a lot about "there's never a right answer, just dare, just take a risk, just go for it…just do it! Just do it". I've always been, the rule is, five minutes now is worth two or three hours later on and four hours in six months' time. Better to be now and talk to that girl, give her a sense of worth and value, and she can then leave happy; two hours later on and six months she'll be a wreck and the amount of intervention will be horrendous.

A teacher representing this 'growth mindset', early intervention and nurturing worldview presents as a powerful role model for achieving success *and* emotional wellbeing. I felt empowered by her passionate enthusiasm for risk-taking, experiencing a sense of motivation to step outside my own comfort zone. I challenged myself to enter this research into a Postgraduate Research Poster

Showcase (Appendix P), something I would not have considered prior to starting the research. I reflected this was perhaps due to being more outcome-focused than I was previously aware, fearing the prospect of failure as echoed in my own hypotheses about *perfectionism* leading to avoidance and subsequent underachievement. Or perhaps it was fearing time spent elsewhere would threaten the quality of my write-up, ironically mirroring the attitudes of the four non-participating schools. What challenging myself actually achieved, applying the 'optimalist' viewpoint co-produced in the study, was an enjoyable process that allowed me to express my creativity and invigorated my passion for the research. It provided a novel experience, in which I met inspiring people and learned a lot about others' research, and myself. I was awarded 'Best Poster', but the real prize was experiential learning of theories I had advocated in the guidance; creativity and risk-taking are rewarding for both process *and* product.

In agreement with Julia (T), it is my belief following this research that we all have aspects of *perfectionism* at times, in those areas we have come to believe are important, and require encouragement and support to step outside our comfort zones. For me, the process of the research and Claire's comments in particular prompted self-reflection and trying something new. Recognising our own needs develops over time and it may be that students just require more scaffolding to achieve such self-awareness. As reiterated throughout the research, language through interaction can have a powerful effect on learning. I argue it can also benefit emotional wellbeing, after all, changing 'I' to 'we' turns mental **i**llness into mental **we**llness. Perhaps *inter*dependence is a healthier goal for students high in *perfectionism* than *in*dependence. I believe it is for the adults around the student to

support the young person to feel better able to seek and receive help from others, through a balanced approach of care and challenge.

I have been able to reflect on the research journey itself from a more philosophical angle. As noted earlier, the research took a more positivist perspective in places, such as utilising the word *misconceptions* and even *perfectionism* itself despite claims that reality is individually interpreted. I am aware that I actually approached the research with a positivist intent; a desire to 'measure' and 'treat' *perfectionism* in the same way other 'conditions' had been approached in my psychiatric work experience and from a research perspective based upon my psychology training at the University of York. However the contradictions in the existing literature over seemingly every aspect of *perfectionism* left me confused and frustrated. It became clear there was no one 'answer' and this prompted the development of a more interpretivist approach, requiring individual exploration to uncover personal meaning attributed to *perfectionism*. I was inspired by this approach as I reflected upon the necessity of understanding personal meaning-making to interpret individuals' unique response to what they perceive in terms of thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and therefore make predictions about how they might behave in certain situations and to different individuals. I have come to appreciate the value of taking such an interpretivist approach for making sense of why people do the things they do and greatly broadening my perspective on *perfectionism*. At times throughout the research however, I felt myself stray back towards a positivist intent and the desire to categorise data and organise evidence to help make progress in an orderly manner. It has become apparent to me over the course of this research just how unwieldy and 'loose' qualitative data can be and it is perhaps understandable that one would

try to impose some form of structure onto such a mass of information, for example through the use of a framework for assessment. This includes the approach taken to capturing the research in written form. As my first piece of research using such an approach, I acknowledge I perhaps have far to go in my journey towards a 'true' qualitative approach, and particularly towards a truly collaborative PAR approach as previously discussed, however I maintain that the necessity of imposing a framework on the current data, including the recognition of personality psychology as somewhat of a baseline to provide language to begin the study, allowed progress to be made and real-world application to be achieved. This is in the spirit of Freire's (1972) musings on the need for reflection *with* action. Based on my journey to this topic, it was my stated desire in this study to inspire positive change; it became apparent during the progress of the research that a balance was required between exploration with individuals, and the need for a baseline framework to produce something perceived to be of value by participants. This helped motivate participants to take part in the research, along with satisfying the intent of the study to promote positive change on a larger scale. I feel more studies carried out in the way will help shift the field of *perfectionism* research towards a more truly interpretative perspective which has real benefit to individuals.

Final thoughts from the research field. I felt conflicted after my final visit to Grey Willow School. I noticed the theme of the Headteacher's letter in the latest school magazine was the importance of resilience and:

> bouncing back from failure with a positive attitude…reframing the problem…practising and developing new approaches – and all the while maintaining a handle on reality;

a pleasing read following the research, which was perhaps having a wider impact. I was also asked to assist with the school's launch of a 'growth mindset' campaign and to consult with the school's STORM team to raise understanding of *perfectionism* to help them prevent self-harm and suicide, and a conversation with Claire indicated she was thinking more broadly about *perfectionism*, for example as it applies to teachers when they have their first baby and cannot keep up their high standards at work. However, in contrast, I noted that the chosen 'student of the week' on a prominent corridor noticeboard had been selected for having done "extra French grammar research at the weekend, above and beyond what we expect of the class". This made me wonder what message was being received by students in the school; what sort of values were being reinforced? Effort, progress, community participation…or individual attainment 'above and beyond' expectations? It is this discrepancy between systemic intentions and real-life practice that could benefit greatly from sensitively-attuned EP involvement.

My final reflection follows an opportune staffroom conversation during my final visit to Beech School. This conversation highlighted a feeling among some staff at this independent school that they are no longer considered professionals, but rather commodities to be bought by parents; they feel the school is considered by many parents to be a service and they expect delivery of 'a product' otherwise they will withdraw their child and the school will lose money and reputation. This inevitably creates a sense of pressure upon schools to meet parental expectation regarding standards, and I wonder what effect this has on staff's capacity to consider the 'development of the whole child', particularly how challenging it may feel to promote the SEMH aspect of education within a climate of attainment. *Perfectionism* may

become an institutional rather than individual student issue, particularly concerning considering the recent government plans to make every school an academy by 2022. This could result in schools experiencing even greater pressure to attain certain outcomes for students, as education provision begins to resemble a competitive business market. Again this could benefit from EP involvement to help schools and families understand child development and the need for a strong focus on SEMH if they desire attainment. Understanding psychodynamics at an organisational as well as individual level could also be beneficial in guiding the school system as a whole towards a more 'optimalist' approach. This would challenge beliefs of the adults around students high in *perfectionism*, helpful considering the recurrent theme amongst students regarding adult attitudes towards those high in *perfectionism* (significant when considering SPP):

> They like them, don't they? (Nadia^, Y10)
> They would be his favourite students (Harry, Y10).

I noticed during the research that those participants high in *perfectionism* seemed to lose track of the purpose of the task and the 'bigger picture', getting instead caught up in the details. This made me wonder whether this is perhaps mirrored in some schools; could staff lose sight of the *process* of schooling due to an intense focus on *outcomes*? This is certainly my experience from my own schooldays and teaching in an 'outstanding' school. Adopting an 'optimalist' perspective could help schools, families and students keep in mind the 'bigger picture'. As highlighted by a student, parent, and teacher who could be described as 'optimalists' in answer to the question, 'what is school for?':

> Well learning's a part of it so you can do what you want later, but then it's also there to make friends and learn things that isn't education like morals, what you gonna do, and find out, discover more about yourself really (Brad, Y9)

> I would say it's a stepping stone, for you to be the person that you want to be eventually, like the groundwork to get to the next stage of your life (Joanne, P)
>
> I think it's preparing young people for life. It's not all about education, it's not about getting those 10 A-Stars. It's about learning about actually how to go out into the big bad world and we say survive! (Julia, T).

It is this view of education which EPs can help to promote, through our unique understanding of child development, psychology and learning. Emotional wellbeing and academic success need to be considered as interrelated and of at least equal importance. This may be particularly pertinent for students high in *perfectionism* at school and beyond, supported by these final comments from the study's self-identifying *perfectionists*:

> My daughter's tormented by it to be honest (Joel^, P)
>
> I wish your information pack was around when I was at school! (James, T)
>
> I felt on my own because not a lot of people understood it. Teachers and parents don't always get it. You feel like the only one in the boat. I think your research could really help me (Jessica, Y10).

6 Conclusions

> …so being a *perfectionist* is not necessarily a good thing is it, when I look at that?
> (Debbie^, P, reflecting on her bipolar constructs for *perfectionism*, success and happiness).

This research successfully explored the perspectives of a sample of Year 9 and 10 students, parents and school staff in four 'high-achieving' UK secondary schools regarding the construct of *perfectionism*. Supporting the contradictory literature, conflict existed in participant constructs for *perfectionism* relating to success and happiness. Participants largely perceived *perfectionism* to be a positive personality trait, associated strongly with success, though recognised elements of stress could prevent a student high in *perfectionism* from being fully happy. Participants were largely unaware of negative associations with *perfectionism*, reflecting a need for awareness-raising to safeguard this vulnerable group, particularly considering the concerning link with suicide. The research process helped develop participants' self-awareness of their own thought processes and conflicts, beginning the process of change. It is recognised that in a different sample of participants, results might have varied, but within the current study, participants felt their voices had been heard, and as a researcher I felt I had sufficient evidence to make informed conclusions about the sample.

The research also successfully produced accessible guidance for participating schools and families, based on the current literature, practical experience and identified gaps in participant knowledge. This was successfully evaluated as part of the PAR process, resulting in a finished product which raised awareness amongst participants of the vulnerability of students high in *perfectionism*, and provided a

range of helpful strategies to challenge *perfectionism* in themselves and others. It also contributes systemic and individual intervention ideas to the literature, based upon psychological theory and existing evidence with older students and adults. On reflection, participant quotations may have brought the guidance to life further, however participants were universally pleased with the product and many expressed personal thanks for what they perceived to be a helpful process. The research highlights the importance of recognising individual's cognitive and affective needs when designing guidance, considering their stage of change and level of scaffolding required to access support, and demonstrated that a variety of assessment approaches are beneficial for identifying students who may be high in *perfectionism*. Supporting the aims of the study, the professionals considered *perfectionism* to be a problematic set of thoughts and behaviours, which could be addressed at each eco-systemic level. The role for the EP is bringing to attention the construct of *perfectionism* and supporting schools to implement the guidance.

This thesis takes the view that *perfectionism* serves a function for the individual, and is therefore amenable to change if an underlying need is identified and more appropriately met in the individual's environment. Developing coping skills more generally is also advisable for all students high in *perfectionism*. However, as in all emancipatory research, caution must be taken not to allow the research to become part of the problem. The intention is not to reinforce the use of a label, *perfectionist*, which may further oppress or marginalise, but rather to identify those individuals suffering as a result of what may be considered *perfectionist* thoughts, feelings and behaviours, then find ways to help improve their situation. The focus here should be ecosystemic, not individual, aiming for social change. Paradoxically, this can be

achieved through individual empowerment; a key tool of the EP. For students high in *perfectionism*, the social barriers to their capacity to live full and active lives are the beliefs of their communities regarding the nature of success and happiness, which serve to maintain a cycle of unhelpful cognitions. The current research made steps towards breaking down these social barriers through raising awareness of conflicts around constructs for success and happiness and therefore understanding of the nature of *perfectionism*. Through the PAR approach, the need for individual control was also recognised, and strategies highlighted that could be implemented on a personal level. It will be of interest to continue to evaluate the practical effectiveness of the guidance, with a view to improving it further and extending the support to other settings.

With schools under increased pressure to achieve high standards, protecting the mental health of students is vital to ensure higher learning can take place and such standards met. Vicariously, the strategies to support students high in *perfectionism* may also offer indirect support to teachers who may be experiencing the negative effects of pressures to perform, which may ultimately benefit students. This study is the first to produce practical guidance for UK schools and families specifically targeting *perfectionism* and in doing so, supports the current political agenda of raising school capacity to support student mental health needs. The language we use is important; this thesis introduced the term ‘optimalist’ into participants’ vocabularies, recognising the high value they place on success yet desire for happiness, encouraging a sense of reality and compassion into their existing framework. We must move away from the notion of a *perfectionist* as an ‘ideal student’. We must also recognise that a universal ‘treatment’ for *perfectionism* does

not exist; we must instead identify the underlying function and personalise our intervention to the individual's needs, taking into account their unique values, attitudes, beliefs and capabilities. It must also be recognised that moving away from *perfectionism* and towards a more 'optimalist' approach to life is likely to be a slow and gradual process, requiring substantial reinforcement and frequent 'refreshers', acknowledging that signs of *perfectionism* may return at times of stress due to its probable function as a coping mechanism. This is likely to be a small-step process of change rather than whole-sale transformation.

This work begins to fill the gap within UK secondary school *perfectionism* research and the international *perfectionism* literature by offering a unique interpretivist perspective which deconstructs the notion of a *perfectionist,* helping to liberate the needs of an invisible vulnerable group. It is therefore of value to a) students, teachers and families who recognise *perfectionism* within themselves and others, b) schools aiming to improve their provision for emotional wellbeing, c) EP services desiring new strategies for working with schools and families, and d) researchers interested in *perfectionism*. It remains unclear how many of our student population could be considered *perfectionists*, but in agreement with Maddy^ (Y9), if the research helps just one student develop their self-awareness and coping skills to achieve both success *and* emotional wellbeing, it will have been worthwhile. Findings suggest it could, and indeed already has.

7 References

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8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A

Table 1

Literature search

Key Words: *Perfectionism, achievement, emotional wellbeing, resilience, mental health, gifted and talented, schools, interventions, children/students, constructs, attitudes, pressure, socially prescribed, evaluative concerns, suicide.*
Search Engines: EBSCO, ASSIA, Cochrane Library, ISI Web of Science, JSTOR, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, PsycINFO, SAGE Open, British Education Index, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Education Research Complete, ERIC.
Journals: **Most frequently used (number of papers cited):** *Behaviour Research and Therapy (7)*; *Canadian Journal of School Psychology (3); Clinical Psychology Review (3); Cognitive Therapy and Research (3); Educational Psychology in Practice (4); Forum: Qualitative Social Research (3); Gifted Child Quarterly (3); Journal of Counseling and Development (3); Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (10)*; *Personality and Individual Differences (17)*; *Psychology in the Schools (15); Psychology of Sport and Exercise (4); Roeper Review (5); Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior (3).* **2 papers cited:** *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy; Child and Adolescent Mental Health; Depression and Anxiety; Educational Psychology; Gifted Education International; Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business; International Journal of Eating Disorders; Journal for the Education of the Gifted; Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioural Assessment; Journal of Research in Personality; Journal of School Nursing; Learning & Individual Differences; Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences; ProQuest.* **1 paper cited:** *Addictive Behaviors; American Educational Research Journal; American Psychology; Annual Review of Public Health; Appetite; Archives of Suicide Research; Asian Social Science; Assessment; Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling; Behavior Therapy;*

Behaviour Change; Behaviour Genetics; Behaviour Modification; Body Image; Body Image: An International Journal of Research; British Journal of Clinical Psychology; British Journal of Health Psychology; British Journal of Psychiatry; Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic; Canadian Journal of Counseling and Psychotherapy; Canadian Review of Social Policy; Child Abuse and Neglect; Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal; Child Development; Child Psychiatry and Human Development; Child Psychopathology; Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry; Connections; Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation; Current Directions in Psychological Science; Current Opinion in Psychiatry; Educational and Child Psychology; Forum; High Ability Studies; International Journal of Mental Health Systems; International Journal of Play Therapy; Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology; Journal of Advanced Academics; Journal of Affective Disorders; Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; Journal of American College Health; Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders; Journal of Child and Family Studies; Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry; Journal of Clinical Psychology; Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings; Journal of College Student Development; Journal of Consulting Psychology; Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology; Journal of Educational Research; Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health; Journal of Family Psychology; Journal of Individual Psychology; Journal of Marriage and Family; Journal of Mental Health Counselling; Journal of Personality; Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; Journal of Personality Assessment; Journal of Psychosomatic Research; Journal of Research in Medical Sciences: The Official Journal of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences; Journal of Research on Adolescence; Journal of School Health; Journal of Youth and Adolescence; Journal of Youth Studies; Mindfulness; Motivation and Emotion; New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development; New England Journal of Medicine; Obesity Reviews; Pastoral Psychology; Peabody Journal of Education; Person-Centred Review; Personality and Social Psychology Review; Physiotherapy; Psychological Assessment; Psychological Medicine; Psychology; Psychology Today; Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics; Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training; Research in Education; Social and Personality Psychology Compass; Social Psychology of Education; Substance Use and Misuse; The Counseling Psychologist; The Journal of Psychology; The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education; The SAGE Handbook of Personality Theory and Assessment; Women's Studies International Forum; World Journal of Biological Psychiatry.

8.2 Appendix B

Table 3

Descriptions of perfectionism used within six popular rating scales (as related by Morris and Lomax, 2014)

Scale name (year)	**Author(s)**	**Key**	**Dimensions**
The Adaptive/Maladaptive *Perfectionism* Scale for Children (2002)	Rice and Preusser	AMPS	1. Sensitivity to mistakes (distress as a result of making errors) 2. Contingent self-esteem (self-esteem based on meeting high standards) 3. Compulsiveness (conscientiousness and organisation) 4. Need for admiration (desire for recognition and admiration)
The Almost Perfect Scale – Revised (1996)	Slaney et al.	APS-R	1. Adaptive *perfectionists* (elevated high standards, low discrepancy scores, i.e. perceives that own standards are being met) 2. Maladaptive *perfectionists* (elevated high standards, elevated discrepancy scores) 3. Non-*perfectionists* (average high standards scores)
The Child and Adolescent *Perfectionism* Scale (1997)	Flett et al.	CAPS	1. Self-oriented *perfectionism* (setting very high personal standards, with non-attainment of goals leading to criticism) 2. Socially-prescribed *perfectionism* (perceiving that others have very high standards for the individual)

The Frost Multidimensional *Perfectionism* Scale (1990)	Frost et al.	FMPS	1. Concern over mistakes 2. Doubts over actions 3. Personal standards 4. Parental expectations 5. Parental criticism 6. Organisation
The *Perfectionism* Cognitions Inventory (1998)	Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein and Gray	PCI	1. *Perfectionism*
The *Perfectionistic* Self-Presentation Scale – Junior Form (2011)	Hewitt et al.	PSPS-J	1. Self-oriented *perfectionism* (setting very high personal standards, with non-attainment of goals leading to self-criticism); Socially-prescribed *perfectionism* (perceiving that others have very high standards for the individual); Other-oriented *perfectionism* (high standards for others) 2. Interpersonal dimensions (*perfectionistic* self-promotion, i.e. showing off one's perfection to others; nondisplay of imperfection, i.e. behaviourally concealing one's imperfection; nondisclosure of imperfection, i.e. concealing one's imperfection by not telling others about it) 3. Cognitive dimensions (information processing factors and negative automatic thoughts)

8.3 Appendix C: Summary of Information from Literature Review

A *perfectionist* is:

Someone who strains compulsively and unceasingly toward unobtainable goals, and measures their self-worth by productivity and accomplishment (Parker and Adkins, 1995). May or may not be a high-achiever. Being *perfectionistic* in one domain of life does not necessarily imply being *perfectionistic* in other domains, but being higher in *perfectionism* makes it more likely that more areas of life will be affected (Stoeber and Stoeber, 2009).

Someone who is not a *perfectionist* is:

An 'optimalist'. Willing to experiment and take risks, content with 'good enough', realistic about expectations for themselves and others. Their self-worth is based on values besides accomplishment. May or may not be a high-achiever.

The origin and maintenance of *perfectionism*:

Likely to be a combination of a genetic 'vulnerability' and environmental factors, leading to the development of individual cognitive errors. Reinforced through environmental factors and lack of experimentation with alternative behaviours.

The risks of *perfectionism*:

Linked with a range of mental health difficulties, as well as under-achievement and social isolation. The most extreme risk appears to be suicide, perhaps particularly for males.

The benefits of *perfectionism*:

May act as a coping mechanism and appear to result in positive outcomes valued by the individual or those around them, e.g. accomplishment.

Can *perfectionists* change?

Yes, with the right kind of support, from the right people, over time.

Should *perfectionists* change?

Yes, if *perfectionism* is understood as in the definition above. The change should be towards a more balanced and realistic view of the self and others, reducing the risks to mental health. The focus should be on healthy high achievement, including resiliency and adaptive coping strategies in order to maintain some of the perceived benefits of *perfectionism*.

What helps *perfectionists* change?

It may be a combination of support tailored to the individual (perhaps involving cognitive-behavioural or acceptance and commitment therapeutic approaches), groupwork, different teaching approaches and whole-school ethos, and involvement of the family.

What doesn't help?

It is likely that being in environments that place high emphasis on accomplishment and outcomes and low emphasis on emotional wellbeing and process will reinforce *perfectionism*.

8.4 Appendix D: Recruitment letter

Research Opportunity for Students, Parents and Teachers…

(Image removed for copyright purposes)

…Have you ever wanted to take part in **real-world** research?

…Would you like to have your **opinions** heard and understood?

…Will **you** be someone who contributes to helping others?

(Image removed for copyright purposes)

Hello,

My name is Dawn Thorley; I'm a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter. I am doing some research as part of my studies and your school have very kindly agreed to help me with this.

Would you like to take part? It's about **your** views about school and learning and what sorts of things are helpful.

Please read the information below which will tell you what will happen in the study.

What is this study about?

It aims to find out what young people, parents and teachers think about different types of learners and what sorts of things help young people be happy and successful.

If you decide you would like to take part, you will need to complete the form below to say you are happy to take part. Even if you do this, you can still quit at any time.

Can I ask questions before I decide?

Yes – my email address is at the bottom of this letter so please feel free to email with any questions.

What will happen if I take part?

First you need to sign the form to say you would be happy to take part (parents will also need to sign to consent to their child taking part, as well as the young person themselves). Second, I will come into school at a mutually convenient date and time to ask you some questions (there are no right and wrong answers, only your opinion!). I will record what you say so I can listen later and write down your ideas. Altogether, you will probably be talking with me for about 40 minutes.

Will what I say be kept private?

Yes. I will use a code on the tape so that when I write down your answers no one knows it's you or what school you are connected to. No-one else will hear the tape and all information will be stored in a locked cabinet so no-one else can see it.

What will happen to the information you collect?

I am going to write about what I find out and make something helpful to give to you at the end of the study!

Researcher: Dawn Thorley (BSc, MSc, PGCE) **Supervisors**: Andrew Richards/Martin Levinson

Email address: dt295@exeter.ac.uk A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk/M.P.Levinson@exeter.ac.uk

Please return to school before (date):

Student name: _____

Please tick one:

- ☐ **Yes** I would like to take part in the study
- ☐ **No** I would not like to take part in the study

Student signature: ……..

Parent signature: …… **Date:** ……

Parent name: _____

Please tick one:

- ☐ **Yes** I would like to take part in the study
- ☐ **No** I would not like to take part in the study

Parent signature: …… **Date:** ……..

8.5 Appendix E: Demographic information

Table 6

Participant demographics (Phase One)

	Year 9 student	**Year 10 student**	**Teacher**	**Parent**	**TOTAL**
Male	3	3	1	2	9
Female	3	8	5	7	23
TOTAL	6	11	6	9	32

Table 7

Participant code names (Phase One)

Code name	**Role**	**School *Perfectionism* rating**	**School**	**Evaluation format (Phase Two)**
Brad	Year 9 student	high	Beech School	In person
Jack	Year 9 student	low	Beech School	In person
Matt	Year 9 student	low	Beech School	In person
Amy (daughter	Year 9 student	high	Grey Willow School	E-mail

of Emma)				
Maddy (daughter of Sandra)	Year 9 student	medium	Grey Willow School	In person
Harriet (daughter of Dave)	Year 9 student	low	Grey Willow School	In person
Harry	Year 10 student	high	Beech School	In person
Charlie (son of Marie)	Year 10 student	unsure	Beech School	In person
Cato	Year 10 student	low	Beech School	In person
Emily	Year 10 student	high	Grey Willow School	In person
Sage (daughter of Jane)	Year 10 student	medium	Grey Willow School	E-mail
Isabelle	Year 10 student	low	Grey Willow School	E-mail

Grace (daughter of Joel)	Year 10 student	high	Appletree Academy	In person
Jessica	Year 10 student	high	Appletree Academy	In person
Lizzie (daughter of Debbie)	Year 10 student	high	Cedar High	E-mail
Charlotte	Year 10 student	high	Cedar High	E-mail
Nadia (daughter of Sally)	Year 10 student	high	Cedar High	In person
James	Teacher	n/a	Beech School	In person
Marie (mother of Charlie)	Teacher	n/a	Beech School	In person
Claire	Teacher	n/a	Grey Willow School	In person
Julia	Teacher	n/a	Appletree Academy	In person
Delta	Teacher	n/a	Cedar High	E-mail
Michelle	Teacher	n/a	Cedar High	E-mail
Joanne	Parent	n/a	Beech School	E-mail
Victoria	Parent	n/a	Beech School	E-mail

Emma (mother of Amy)	Parent	n/a	Grey Willow School	E-mail
Sandra (mother of Maddy)	Parent	n/a	Grey Willow School	(no reply)
Dave (father of Harriet)	Parent	n/a	Grey Willow School	E-mail
Jane (mother of Sage)	Parent	n/a	Grey Willow School	E-mail
Joel (father of Grace)	Parent	n/a	Appletree Academy	E-mail
Sally (mother of Nadia)	Parent	n/a	Cedar High	(no reply)
Debbie (mother of Lizzie)	Parent	n/a	Cedar High	(no reply)

Those participants who have a parent/child link will be demarcated in quotations with the following symbol: ^ (e.g. Joel^ denotes Joel is a parent of a student in the study.

Grace^ denotes Grace is the child of a parent in the study). The exception to this is Charlie and Marie; since Marie was participating as a teacher, not a parent, this link was disregarded for the current study.

Table 8

Participant demographics (Phase Two)

Code name	**Role**	**Location**
Mary	Art Psychotherapist	London
Shane	CAMHS Psychiatrist	Dorset
Kate	CBT Therapist	Cambridge
Liz	Integrative Counsellor	Bristol
David	Lead Specialist Practitioner in Psychotherapy/Mental Health Nurse	London
Whippet	Mental Health Nurse/DBT Therapist	York
Jeremy	Educational Psychologist	Dorset
John	Educational Psychologist	York
Simon	Educational Psychologist	Gloucester

8.6 Appendix F: Activity details

Dynamic assessment

Students and parents were first asked “would you like to do an easy or a hard activity?” Once selected, they were then shown an image based upon the Rey-Osterrieth complex figure test and told they had 30 seconds to memorise the image, then they would be expected to “draw it from memory as precisely and accurately as possible”. Participants had a sand timer in front of them to show them how long they had left, and a range of pencils, pens, ruler, eraser and pencil sharpener to select from to recreate the image. Once complete, there was a discussion of issues arising from this activity, including the themes of pride, stress and making mistakes.

If participants chose “easy”, they were given the following picture to memorise and draw (A5 size):

Figure 3. Rey-Osterreith Complex Figure Drawing Test Image One.

If participants chose “hard”, they were given the following picture to memorise and draw (A5 size):

Figure 4. Rey-Osterreith Complex Figure Drawing Test Image Two.

If participants said they didn't mind or they didn't know which to choose, both cards were shown face down for the participant to choose between. Of course, it was less the difficulty of the images that was important, and more the choice made by the participant and their beliefs about the activity's difficulty which was of interest.

Triadic elicitation

The student and parents' second activity (the teachers' first activity) involved the triadic elicitation of constructs around success and happiness using ten eliciting elements under the theme 'knowledge and understanding of the construct':

1. What a person with this is

2. What a person with this is not/what a person without this is

3. What thoughts, feelings and behaviours this person has

4. What thoughts, feelings and behaviours they do not have/a person without this has

5. What positive things might happen for a person like this

6. What positive things might happen for a person not like this

7. What negative things might happen for a person like this

8. What negative things might happen for a person not like this

9. How a person gets to be like this

10. How a person gets to not be like this

Emergent constructs were recorded on two pieces of paper on which were written the headings 'successful', 'not successful' (paper 1), and 'happy', 'not happy' (paper 2). During discussions a line between bipolar constructs was drawn, providing further discussion around the changeability of these constructs. Examples can be found in Appendix I. Within this task, participants were also given the opportunity to reflect upon their beliefs about the purpose of school. The rating of constructs was omitted following a pilot interview, as it was not felt to be a priority; discussing success and happiness was more of an introduction for the participants into the style of discussion to be had around *perfectionism* and to better understand their use of language within the context of the interaction, along with further developing rapport before explicitly exploring *perfectionism*.

Projective techniques

Finally, all participants were asked for their prior knowledge and understanding of the word *perfectionist*. Emerging constructs from this discussion were recorded on another blank sheet (see Appendix I for examples). To elicit further constructs, participants were shown a copy of the following image A5 size ('Blob classroom'; Long and Wilson, 2009) and asked which characters could be *perfectionists*, and which ones definitely were not, giving reasons for their answers:

Figure 5. The Blob Classroom.

The use of the pyramiding technique here helped elicit specific thoughts, feelings and behaviours attributed to *perfectionists*. This activity is similar to Ravenette's (1980) 'a drawing and its opposite' technique, but removing the need for participants to draw for themselves. This was felt to be in the benefits of time and engagement, following a pilot interview. The method more closely echoes an adult *perfectionism* group exercise described by clinical psychologist Szymanski (2011; p.140) in which members were asked to describe their idea of a *perfectionist* and then a non-*perfectionist*, with the facilitator scribing the descriptors at opposite ends of a board. The projective approach was selected instead of the triadic elicitation method as pilot interviews revealed participants may struggle to think of enough people they know who are *perfectionists* in order to utilise this technique effectively. Hence the technique was used earlier in the interview for thinking about people who are 'really good at their work' (successful) and people who are 'really happy in their life' (happy) to detect any commonalities or discrepancies between participants' beliefs regarding success, happiness and *perfectionism*, as pilot interviews revealed the constructs of success and happiness were easier for participants to relate to people they know than *perfectionism*, perhaps indicating some confusion or conflict for participants about what exactly a *perfectionist* is, or perhaps in itself revealing that a *perfectionist*, within their construction, is rare. The classroom picture provided a broad range of behaviours for participants to select from so their discussion could be based upon their unique understanding rather than a best fit. Participants were asked the same ten questions as above, with discussion progressing according to participants' responses.

A pre-prepared sheet of scenario pictures based upon areas of life students tend to face in secondary school was then given to participants, to prompt reflection on situations facing students high in *perfectionism* (images courtesy of freeclipart.com):

Figure 6. Scenario pictures.

Again this provided further constructs to be recorded, and also facilitated the use of the laddering process with some participants where appropriate, to elicit higher order constructs. A line was drawn between the bipolar constructs, prompting discussions regarding the changeability of *perfectionism*. This loosely followed Tschudi's ABC model (1977) in which important issues could be uncovered by exploring A, what the person considers the opposite of *perfectionism* to be; B; what the person considers to be the disadvantages of *perfectionism* and the advantages of non-*perfectionism*; and C, what the person considers to be the disadvantages of non-*perfectionism* and advantages of *perfectionism*, or the 'implicative dilemma' (Hinkle, 1965), key in identifying what might stop *perfectionists* from changing.

PCP reflections

Participants were asked to mark on the lines for the success and happiness constructs where they would place the 'average *perfectionist'*, prompting additional constructs from many participants. Time was then provided following these discussions to allow the participant to reflect on their emergent constructs and receive feedback on similarities and discrepancies between the three documents; success, happiness and *perfectionism*. Closed-questions were asked regarding the possibility for various combinations of constructs (successful *perfectionist*, happy *perfectionist*, not successful *perfectionist*, not happy *perfectionist*) to provide a small amount of quantitative data about the broader picture, to complement the in-depth, richer data from the qualitative approaches. This mixed methods approach reduces the limitations inherent in reliance on a single approach (Dattilio, Edwards & Fishman, 2010). Finally, parents and students were asked to mark themselves and their child/parent on the *perfectionism* construct line, again providing further information through commentary.

Phase Two involved three distinct parts, all based upon the philosophies underpinning PAR and the involvement of participants in their own process of change:

1. Collaboration with other professionals,
2. Production of guidance,
3. Evaluating the guidance.

Appendix H shows an information sheet and consent form sent via e-mail to each external professional, followed by a document with an outline of the purposes of the study, a brief overview of the literature and a narrative account of the main data, summarised under broad themes. It ended with a summary of the gaps and *misconceptions* interpreted from the data, followed by questions for the participants to consider and provide their answers either via e-mail, in a face-to-face discussion or over the telephone as suited their preferences. Following these responses, a final summary of gaps and *misconceptions* was produced, along with a synthesis of intervention ideas.

An information sheet was then created using the gaps and *misconceptions*, and synthesis of intervention ideas, and sent via e-mail to each of the EP participants along with their information and consent sheets (Appendix H). Telephone interviews were then conducted with each of the EPs, lasting around thirty minutes, using the questions on the information sheets as a basis for discussion. This concluded the 'collaboration with professionals' part of the study.

The key information on *perfectionism* identified in the literature review was then consulted alongside the gaps and *misconceptions* identified from Phase One, participant preferences for guidance, and feedback from the external professionals and EPs. Consideration was given to the assertion that successful dissemination strategies are those which:

> actively engage users and deliver what the users both want and need (FDTL, 1997; p.8).

Once the method of dissemination was decided upon, an action plan was drawn up using a framework proposed by the FDTL (1997; p.27), with two added columns of 'cost' (a realistic consideration in the context of a doctoral thesis) and 'criteria for success' (so effectiveness can be evaluated). The considerations and action plan can be found in Appendix L. A draft copy of guidance for supporting students high in *perfectionism* was then produced through synthesising this information and the considerations with artistic collaboration from two of the participants; Rebecca and Mary.

The final part of this Phase was evaluating the guidance. All participants had expressed an interest in being involved further in the research; they were contacted to ascertain continued interest. Respondents were sent a copy of the guidance relevant to their participant group, and given the option to discuss the guidance in person, over the telephone, or via e-mail as appropriate. Of the original 32 participants, 29 took part in the follow-up evaluation. The information about these participants is shown in Appendix E.

The five purposes of dissemination identified by the FDTL (1997; p.30) are awareness, support and favourability, understanding, involvement and commitment. These elements were incorporated into discussions about the guidance when interviewing participants in person, and encompassed in an e-mail for the remaining participants (Appendix N). Adaptations were made to the guidance following discussions, and hardcopy final versions sent out to participants (Appendix M). This concluded the research.

8.7 Appendix G: Certificate of ethical approval

MSc, PhD, EdD & DEdPsych theses.

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Graduate School of Education

Certificate of ethical research approval

MSc, PhD, EdD & DEdPsych theses

To activate this certificate you need to first sign it yourself, and then have it signed by your supervisor and finally by the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee.

For further information on ethical educational research access the guidelines on the BERA web site: http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications and view the School's Policy online.

READ THIS FORM CAREFULLY AND THEN COMPLETE IT ON YOUR COMPUTER (the form will expand to contain the text you enter). **DO NOT COMPLETE BY HAND**

Your name: Dawn Thorley

Your student no: 630047928

Return address for this certificate: Garden Flat, 13 Cornwallis Crescent, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 4PJ

Degree/Programme of Study: DEdPsych: Doctorate in Educational, Child and Community Psychology

Project Supervisor(s): Martin Levinson & Andrew Richards

Your email address: dt295@exeter.ac.uk

Tel: 07730 654 926

I hereby certify that I will abide by the details given overleaf and that I undertake in my thesis to respect the dignity and privacy of those participating in this research.

I confirm that if my research should change radically, I will complete a further form.

Signed: D Thorley **date:** 18/3/15

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee
updated: March 2013

Certificate of ethical research approval

TITLE OF YOUR PROJECT:

Perfectionism in Primary and Secondary Students: Producing Guidance for Schools.

1. **Brief description of your research project:**

My project firstly involves gathering individual perspectives from students, teachers and parents regarding the construct of perfectionism, including their views on school pressures, achievement and emotional wellbeing. The second part of the project involves collaboration with other professionals to bring together the information from stakeholders with professional expertise and psychological theory, to produce guidance to help schools and families support students high in perfectionism. This guidance will receive a preliminary evaluation from focus groups of stakeholders.

2. **Give details of the participants in this research (giving ages of any children and/or young people involved):**

Participants will be opportunistically sampled from Southwest of England primary and secondary schools willing to take part in the research, aiming for approximately 12 teachers, 12 parents or carers, and 24 students in total, across a range of school settings. Students will range from Key Stage One to Key Stage Five (ages 6-18). There will also be a sample of professional participants, to provisionally include: a Headteacher, a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), a clinical psychologist, a neurodevelopmental nurse, a youth counsellor, the director of a mental health website, a graphic artist and a design production coordinator. These will be approached through known contacts in the Southwest of England and selected on the basis of their knowledge to guide the content and/or design of the guidance.

Give details (with special reference to any children or those with special needs) regarding the ethical issues of:

3. **informed consent: Where children in schools are involved this includes both headteachers and parents). Copy(ies) of your consent form(s) you will be using must accompany this document.** a blank consent form can be downloaded from the GSE student access on-line documents: **Each consent form MUST be personalised with your contact details.**

Participants will be invited to take part on a voluntary basis with the right to withdraw from the study at any point or have their data removed upon request without needing to provide a reason. Prospective participants will be provided with an information sheet about the study. Please see attached (x2). Following this, they will also be provided with a consent form to sign. Please see attached (x2). The information and consent forms have been adapted from those used by Cheney (2014) in a study also eliciting individual views. The final sheets for the child participants will also have colourful images on to make them more accessible. Participants and researcher will be required to sign copies; participants and researcher will keep copies of both information sheet and consent form. Participants will give this written, informed consent following clear explanation of the nature and content of the study in writing and verbatim, including the possible emergence of core constructs, their protection from harm, how their data will be handled, and they will 'opt in' rather than being required to 'opt out'. This applies to taking part in

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Study 2 in addition to Study 1. Parents will give informed consent for their child to take part in the study, as well as individual consent from each child.

4. anonymity and confidentiality

To ensure anonymity, schools will not be named, but distinguished from others through broad descriptors such as 'girls' grammar school' or pseudonyms. I will also simply refer to the research taking place "in an authority in the Southwest of England" to further protect settings. Participants will be kept anonymous throughout the process; data will be coded to protect their identity by using a pseudonym or number spoken at the beginning of the interviews. Professionals will simply be referred to by the title of their profession, for example "Headteacher", "clinical psychologist". A record will be stored securely linking codes to participant information in case a participant chooses to withdraw their data. Data will be stored securely, complying with the Data Protection Act, and destroyed after 5 years following completion of the research.

5. Give details of the methods to be used for data collection and analysis and how you would ensure they do not cause any harm, detriment or unreasonable stress:

The first part of data collection will involve semi-structured interviews, using Personal Construct Psychology. I am aware of the potentially sensitive nature of this approach and will ensure participants are fully informed of this nature through an initial explanation of the procedure. I will employ counselling skills (gained through previous qualification) if required to alleviate any distress, or refer participants on to an appropriate person within their setting if more appropriate. An example of such distress could be anxiety over becoming aware of a conflict between a core construct and actual behaviour, or becoming aware of ones' own perfectionist nature. I will use triadic elicitation, laddering and pyramiding, a picture and its opposite, and the magic wand question. I will perform differentiated analysis using the 'consensus, correspondence, conflict and contrast matrix' (Shaw and Gaines, 1989) to compare and contrast constructs, terminology and priorities between stakeholders (Holsti, 1968), and deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse responses to the vignettes (triadic elicitation) and drawings (a picture and its opposite), aiming to draw out themes of risk, causation and intervention at different ecosystemic levels. I will spend time building rapport with participants and emphasise that I am interested in their real views, there are no wrong answers, and they can ask me to clarify anything if needed. The use of PCP as a method of information collection shows respect for individual experience, treating participants as co-researchers rather than objects of study. The interview process will be altered if needed in response to emerging participant need, through the use of a reflexive journal and academic supervision.

The second part of data collection will involve semi-structured interviews with professionals using hierarchical focused questioning. This will be analysed using interactive thematic analysis involving 6 stages (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and a deductive approach. nVivo software and mindmaps will be used to facilitate the analysis. The collaborative nature of the research will be made clear to participants.

Finally there will be focus group semi-structured interviews using hierarchical focused questioning. These will be also analysed using interactive thematic analysis involving 6 stages (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and a deductive approach. All interview processes will be fully explained and participants will have the option of reviewing their interview data. Pilot interviews will be carried out before any study data is collected to ensure questions are suitable and cause no unreasonable stress.

6. Give details of any other ethical issues which may arise from this project - e.g. secure storage of videos/recorded interviews/photos/completed questionnaires, or

Interviews will be digitally recorded and written notes made during the PCP questions. Storage of interview tapes, written notes and annotated drawings will be in a locked filing cabinet and they will be destroyed after 5 years following completion of the research. To securely store digital data I will use a password-protected

computer, locked in a secure cupboard when not in use, and the data itself will have the use of pseudonyms and be backed up on an encrypted memory stick, also stored in a locked cupboard when not in use.

7. special arrangements made for participants with special needs etc.

Participants will be asked in the initial contact telephone call whether they have any special requirements for the interview process. Accommodations will be made where possible; participants will not be excluded from the study on the basis of difficulties to access the research methods. Participant comfort level will be monitored throughout using observation skills and explicit questioning if required.

8. Give details of any exceptional factors, which may raise ethical issues (e.g. potential political or ideological conflicts which may pose danger or harm to participants):

A major ethical consideration is the identification of a vulnerable group, or vulnerability within individual participants; this will be managed using counselling skills and referral to appropriate persons during the interview, and also followed up during Paper 2 which will produce guidance for stakeholders on how best to support these individuals. Access to the final report will be made available for all who took part in the research.

***This form should now be printed out**, signed by you on the first page and sent to your supervisor to sign. Your supervisor will forward this document to the School's **Research Support Office** for the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee to countersign. A unique approval reference will be added and this certificate will be returned to you to be included at the back of your dissertation/thesis.*

***N.B.** You should not start the fieldwork part of the project until you have the signature of your supervisor*

This project has been approved for the period: 1/4/15 **until:** 31/8/16

By (above mentioned supervisor's signature): [signature] **date:** 24/3/15

***N.B. To Supervisor:** Please ensure that ethical issues are addressed annually in your report and if any changes in the research occur a further form is completed.*

GSE unique approval reference: D|14|15|34

Signed: [signature] **date:** 24/3/15
Chair of the School's Ethics Committee

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee
updated: March 2013

8.8 Appendix H: Information and Consent Forms (originally A4 size)

Young Person Participant Information Sheet (adapted from Cheney, 2014)

Hi, I'm Dawn Thorley! I'm a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter. I am doing this research as part of my project.

Would you like to take part in my study? It's about what people think about 'perfectionism' and what helps students who are perfectionists.

Before you decide if you want to take part, look at the information on this sheet. This sheet will tell you what will happen in the study. If there is anything you are not sure about, you can ask me to explain.

What is this study about?

This study is trying to find out what young people, parents and teachers think about 'perfectionism' and what sorts of things might help a perfectionist be happy and successful.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's totally up to you. If you decide you would like to take part, you will need to sign a form to say you are happy to take part. Even if you do this, you can still quit at any time if you want to!

Can I ask questions before I decide?

Yes. Please do ask me if you are at all unsure.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide to take part you will need to sign a form that says you want to take part. After that, we will do an interview that will last around 40 minutes.

I would like to find out what you think about different things in school, such as things the teachers say, doing well at schoolwork, learning new things, competitions and peer pressure, as well as what you understand by 'perfectionism'. While you are talking, what you say will be recorded on a tape. This is so later I can listen again and write down your ideas. I will also ask you to draw a really simple picture for me and we will talk about this together.

Will what I say be kept private?

Yes. Only you, your parent and a member of staff at your school will know you are taking part in the study. I will use a special code on the tape so only I know that it's yours. The tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet so no one else can listen to them.

The only time I will have to tell someone about you is if I'm worried that you are not safe. I will tell you if I need to talk to someone. I will NOT talk about you behind your back.

What will happen to the information Dawn collects?

I am going to write about what I find out. I am then going to talk with some other professionals about what I've found out and we will bring all the ideas together to make some helpful guidance. If you or your parent want to know what I have found out I will tell you. There is also the option to look through this guidance with me once it is complete, along with some other people I interviewed, to help me know if it is suitable or needs some changes. If you would like to do this, please let me know! It would be really helpful.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any worries about the study, you can ask your parent/carer to call or email so you can speak to me. Thank you for reading!

Young Person Consent form (adapted from Cheney, 2014)

Project Title: "Perfectionism in Secondary Schools: Producing Supportive Guidance"

Young person to circle all they agree with:

Has someone explained this project to you?	Yes/No
Do you understand what this project is about?	Yes/No
Have you asked all the questions you want?	Yes/No
Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand?	Yes/No
Do you understand it's OK to stop taking part at any time?	Yes/No
Are you clear about what will happen with the information you give?	Yes/No
Are you happy to take part?	Yes/No

If any answers are 'no' or you don't want to take part, don't sign your name!

If you do want to take part, you can write your name below:

Your name ……

Date ……

I am happy to take part in a discussion about the guidance at a later date: Yes/No

The person who explained this project to you needs to sign too:

Print name ……

Sign ……

Date ……

If you think of any more questions, you can contact the researcher:

Email dt295@exeter.ac.uk

Address College of Social Sciences, Exeter University, Devon, UK.

Or her supervisor, Andrew Richards - A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk (address as above)

Thank you for your help,

Dawn Thorley (researcher).

Adult Participant Information Sheet (adapted from Cheney, 2014)

Perfectionism in Secondary Schools: Producing Helpful Guidance

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The research is being conducted by Dawn Thorley, Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter, as part of a Doctorate in Educational, Child and Community Psychology. Dawn has previous training as a counsellor and teacher. The study has received full ethical clearance by the University of Exeter Graduate School of Education ethics committee.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to find out what different people know and understand about perfectionism and the pressures facing young people at school. This information will be used to help produce guidance for schools and families for 'best practice' for supporting students high in perfectionism.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's up to you whether or not to take part. If you do, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason; all identifiable materials will be destroyed and your data removed from future analyses.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide you would like to take part in the study, you will sign a consent form agreeing to participate then we will do an interview together lasting around 40 minutes. This will involve answering short and longer questions to gather information about your perspectives. Discussion of your ideas may lead to perspectives you previously hadn't given much thought to, hence you are likely to learn something about yourself from the experience, as well as providing the researcher with helpful insights!

Will my taking part be anonymous?

Yes. All information about your participation in the study will be anonymised.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The data will be written up as part of professional postgraduate training at the University of Exeter. It is hoped that the information will be used to help find ways of supporting the emotional wellbeing of students who are high in perfectionism. If you are interested in finding out about the results of the study, the researcher will arrange a way to feed this back to you. There is also the option of taking part in a focus group to evaluate the guidance that will be produced; if you are interested in being part of this group, please let the researcher know. Your input would be gratefully received!

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of the study, you should contact the researcher (dt295@exeter.ac.uk) who will do her best to answer your questions. Alternatively, you may prefer to contact her supervisor (Andrew Richards: A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk).

Will information about me be kept safely?

Yes. Information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and will have your name and address removed so you cannot be recognised from it. It will be destroyed after five years following completion of the project.

Thank you for reading!

Adult Participant Consent form (adapted from Cheney, 2014)

Perfectionism in Secondary Schools: Producing Supportive Guidance

A research study towards a doctoral thesis.

Dawn Thorley (BSc, MSc, PGCE), Trainee Educational Psychologist

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that:

- my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, by contacting the researcher.
- if I have any concerns or questions about the research I would like to discuss, I can do so by contacting the researcher (details below). If I want to discuss these things with someone else, I can contact the researcher's supervisor (Andrew Richards, course director: A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk).
- my participation, address and phone number will be kept strictly confidential. My contact details will be kept separately from my interview data and all my data will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act and destroyed after five years.
- my interview data will be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of my name, but reference only to the group of which I am a member.
- my interview tape and transcript will be held in confidence, and not be used other than for the purposes described in the information sheet. Third parties will not be allowed access to them (except as may be required by the law). However, if I request it, I will be supplied with a copy of *my* interview transcript so that I can comment on and edit it as I see fit (please give your email below).

I agree to take part in the above study and to the use of my data for the purposes specified above.

Name of interviewee: ……Date:……

Signature: ……..

I am happy to be contacted at a later date to take part in a focus group discussion about the guidance (you may change your mind): Yes/No

Name of researcher: Dawn Thorley Date:……

Signature of researcher: ……..

Email: dt295@exeter.ac.uk

Phone: 07730 654926

Address: College of Social Sciences, Exeter University, Devon, UK.

Alternative contact: Andrew Richards (supervisor), A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk (address as above).

2 copies to be signed by both interviewee and researcher, one kept by each.

Professionals Information and Consent Sheet (adapted from Cheney, 2014)

Perfectionism: Producing Guidance for Schools and Families

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The research is being conducted by Dawn Thorley, Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter, as part of a Doctorate in Educational, Child and Community Psychology. Dawn has previous training as a counsellor and teacher. The study has received full ethical clearance by the University of Exeter Graduate School of Education ethics committee.

What is the purpose of the study?

The first part of the study aimed to find out what different people know and understand about perfectionism and the pressures facing young people at school. This part has already been completed. The second part of the study will use this information to help produce guidance for schools and families for supporting students high in perfectionism.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's up to you whether or not to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason; all identifiable materials will be destroyed and your data removed from future analyses.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide you would like to take part in the study, you will sign and return a consent form agreeing to participate (or a named e-mail is fine), then I will send you a document to read via e-mail. The document is 6 pages long and contains 6 questions I would like you to consider. It is up to you whether you would like to write the answers for me via e-mail/post, or speak with me either in person or over the telephone. If we speak, I will need to record our discussion so I can write down your ideas later.

Will my taking part be anonymous?

Yes. All information about your participation in the study will be anonymised. You can choose a pseudonym!

What will happen to the results of the study?

The data will be written up as part of professional postgraduate training at the University of Exeter. It is hoped that the information will be used to help find ways of supporting the emotional wellbeing of students who are high in perfectionism. If you are interested in finding out about the results of the study, the researcher will arrange a way to feed this back to you. If you would like to take part in a discussion to evaluate the guidance which is produced, please let the researcher know. Your input would be gratefully received!

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of the study, you should contact the researcher (dt295@exeter.ac.uk) who will do her best to answer your questions. Alternatively, you may prefer to contact her supervisor (Andrew Richards: A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk).

Will information about me be kept safely?

Yes. Information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and will have your name and e-mail address removed so you cannot be recognised from it. It will be destroyed after five years following completion of the project.

Perfectionism: Producing Guidance for Schools and Families

A research study towards a doctoral thesis.

Dawn Thorley (BSc, MSc, PGCE), Trainee Educational Psychologist

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, by contacting the researcher.
- If I have any concerns or questions about the research I would like to discuss, I can do so by contacting the researcher (details below). If I want to discuss these things with someone else, I can contact the researcher's supervisor (Andrew Richards, course director: A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk).
- My participation, e-mail address and phone number (where provided) will be kept strictly confidential. My contact details will be kept separately from my interview data and all my data will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act and destroyed after five years.
- My interview data will be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of my name, but reference only to the group of which I am a member.
- If we have a discussion that is recorded, my interview tape and transcript will be held in confidence, and not be used other than for the purposes described in the information sheet. Third parties will not be allowed access to them (except as may be required by the law). However, if I request it, I will be supplied with a copy of *my* interview transcript so that I can comment on and edit it as I see fit (please give your email below).

I agree to take part in the above study and to the use of my data for the purposes specified above.

Name of participant: …… Date:……

My professional role/background: ……

Signature (if sending by post, otherwise name above is sufficient): ……

I am happy to be contacted at a later date to take part in a focus group discussion about the guidance:

Yes/No

Name of researcher: Dawn Thorley Date: 12.10.15

Email: dt295@exeter.ac.uk

Phone: 07730 654926

Address: College of Social Sciences, Exeter University, Devon, UK.

Alternative contact: Andrew Richards (supervisor), A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk (address as above).

Perfectionism: Producing Guidance for Schools and Families. Information for external professionals

Page 1	**Brief summary of the literature and aims of the study**
Page 1	**Your role as an external professional**
Page 2-5	**Summary of the data** • ***What is a perfectionist?*** • ***What isn't a perfectionist?*** • ***Where does perfectionism come from?*** • ***What are the benefits and risks of perfectionism?*** • ***Thoughts on the changeability of perfectionism***
Page 5	**Summary of gaps and *misconceptions* in the data**
Page 6	**Questions for you to think about**

Brief summary of the literature and aims of the study

Perfectionism has been linked with mental health conditions and suicidality in adults, but the research on perfectionism in children is limited, particularly in the UK. The literature on 'treating' perfectionism is mixed due to differing opinions on its cause, nature and changeability, with a current preference for Cognitive-Behavioural approaches. Some feel there could be 'adaptive' forms of perfectionism since it is commonly linked with high achievement, though other researchers believe all types of perfectionism are potentially harmful and should be challenged.

The first part of my research aims to find out what a sample of 32 stakeholders (Year 9 and 10 students, teachers and parents from four high-achieving schools) think about perfectionism, with a view to identifying any gaps or *misconceptions* in knowledge or understanding which may contribute to increasing the risk of later mental health problems for students who are high in perfectionism. The second part of my research aims to produce guidance for schools and families to support such students.

Your role as an external professional

You have been approached and kindly agreed to help with my study - many thanks! – as a professional with different training and experiences from myself as an Educational Psychologist. I am interested in your views on the data I have collected to help in the production of guidance. If you need any more information, please don't hesitate to ask! Any insights from your professional background will be hugely valuable to help me produce an integrative approach for schools and families.

Below is a summary of the data from semi-structured interviews involving an accuracy-based activity, projective techniques, open- and closed- questions and the use of Personal Construct Psychology. After reading the material below, I would be grateful if you would consider the following questions:

1. *Do you agree with the gaps and misconceptions I have identified; if not, which would you query and why?*

2. *Are there any gaps or misconceptions you would identify from the data that I have missed, from your perspective as a different professional?*

3. *Given this data, what ideas can you think of for intervention or prevention of problematic perfectionism? Does your profession have a particular approach that could help?*

4. *Do you foresee any challenges with these ideas, and if so, what are they and do you have any thoughts about how they may be best overcome?*

5. *From your understanding and experience, do you see a role for the Educational Psychologist here or is this the remit of other professionals? Do you see a role for multidisciplinary working here?*

6. *Are there any other thoughts you have or comments you'd like to make about the research or data?*

Summary of the data

What is a perfectionist?

A couple of students noted that there may not be any clear outward signs that someone is a perfectionist, however the majority of participants suggested clear behavioural clues. Commonly mentioned behaviours included concentrating, improving their performance, working hard, being inquisitive, prepared, excelling, organised, conscientious, neat, tidy, demonstrating self-control, focused and eager to learn. There was a strong belief that these behaviours either related only to schoolwork, or covered all areas of the student's life. There was a small number of participants who suggested perfectionists gloat over achievement, cheat to ensure things are correct, show anger when others disrupt their learning, make self-critical comments, cannot sleep through anxiety, take too long on tasks, seek attention, are edgy, fret, fuss, miss out on social or leisure activities and cry when things are not to their standard. One parent referred to such individuals as "not human" in their behaviour due to not appearing to make mistakes. Relating to this, a couple of participants believed that it is possible to be 'perfect' and not make any mistakes.

The most common perfectionist thoughts described were holding unrealistic expectations, critically comparing to others, lacking self-belief, paranoia, critical self-messages around failure, self-induced pressure, being outcome- rather than process-focussed, over-attention to mistakes rather than successes, obsessiveness and never accepting anything less than perfect. Two participants used the words 'turmoil' and 'torment'. Less common thoughts were confidence in their abilities, being pleased with achievements, being driven and motivated, having orderly plans and a sense of purpose, positive self-talk, and wanting to learn. There was a sense that these may come at the expense of social inclusion.

The perfectionist's feelings were perceived to be nervousness or worry, with mention also of disappointment, apprehension, dread, panic, upset, stressed, exhausted, scared, terrified, annoyed, irritated, frustrated, angry, uncertain, angst, distressed and misery. A small number of participants perceived perfectionists to be confident, satisfied, calm, comfortable, pleased, happy, proud and excited. Most participants recognised that there is likely to be a mixture of feelings for perfectionists.

There was a clear perception that perfectionists dislike mistakes and failure, with challenges including any areas in which expectations may be high. Popular examples were exams, homework, performances and leaving school. One participant said perfectionists never get over making a mistake, and all participants felt coming second place in something would be perceived as a failure for perfectionists. The main discourse was around perfectionists liking to have things under their control and done in a certain way, so anything threatening that could be a challenge for them. Particular examples were unstructured environments such as a house party, or even working in a group with others. One participant likened perfectionism to autism. A handful of participants felt perfectionists wouldn't find typically-stressful situations such as exams challenging as they are confident and organised, and may even relish such challenges. Most participants felt perfectionists want things to be right, want to know everything and want to do or be the best possible, with lots of mention of 'needing' these things.

There was a general perception among all participants that teachers would like perfectionists, though one participant suggested they may unintentionally ignore them. There was also a belief that other students would either not like perfectionist students, or would ignore them. Themes discussed include jealousy, thinking the perfectionist is strange/odd, annoyance, sabotage and bullying. To a large extent, success was perceived to be correlated with perfectionism, however happiness experienced an inverse relationship. Many participants discussed that a perfectionist's happiness would very much depend on their *perceived* success which is likely to be different from how successful they are perceived by others.

A small number of participants self-identified as perfectionist through discussion, with a larger number self-identifying through the personal construct task. It was notable that some participants may have felt a little embarrassed about this disclosure, observed through nervous giggles and the need to explain their reasoning or make a joke about their self-rating. When discussing their ideal self, it was notable that many of the boys would like to be more perfectionist than they currently are, yet were more likely to perceive perfectionists as successful but unhappy. The other boys were happy as they are, placing themselves relatively highly up the perfectionism scale. Half of the girls wanted to be less of a perfectionist, although the majority of girls perceived perfectionists to be both successful and reasonably happy. The other half of girls felt happy as they are; all had rated themselves relatively highly as well. Only one participant, a teacher, suggested the notion perhaps of perfectionism as a spectrum that we move along at different times in our life.

What isn't a perfectionist?

On the whole, a 'not perfectionist' was perceived as someone who is non-conforming, disruptive, lazy, lacking self-discipline, concentration and focus, and being more likely to take risks and "not care". One parent suggested it should be non-perfectionists we are aiming to change, not perfectionists. One student suggested teachers would be annoyed with them but other students might admire them for being rebellious. They were perceived as people less likely to be successful than perfectionists, but more likely to be happy. The more positive thoughts of non-perfectionists were considered to be less criticism of themselves and others, and being more "*go with the flow*".

Where does perfectionism come from?

There was a divide between participants feeling perfectionism is something people are born with and those believing it arises from environmental factors. The majority acknowledged that it may be an interaction between the two, as reflected in the literature, and a couple acknowledged they didn't know. Some compared perfectionism to a mental illness. Some participants offered contrasting views within the same dialogue, with a dominant discourse of 'it's just the way you are' and the influence of parental pressure. Other 'nurture' factors included siblings, friends, schooling and exams, illness, society as a whole/the modern world and the government. Participants from the girls' independent grammar felt schooling was a stronger factor than participants from the boys' independent grammar and comprehensives. Participants attributed non-perfectionism to nature more than they did perfectionism.

What are the benefits and risks of perfectionism?

Participants could discuss benefits of being precise and accurate, such as getting desirable jobs and generally producing results, linked also to having high standards and expectations. A number of participants felt perfectionists were likely to go far in life and do well due to their perfectionism. When discussing making mistakes there was a sense that lack of precision and accuracy in life could result in problems such as miscommunication, reduced motivation and failure, or even dangerous outcomes. Many participants struggled to think of times when it wouldn't be helpful to be precise and accurate, the most common idea being in creative activities, and a couple of participants couldn't identify any negative outcomes of being a perfectionist.

The majority of risks identified were relatively minor, such as annoyance to others and missing out on leisure time, becoming perhaps isolated and antisocial. Stress was a common theme, although lacked elaboration of its extent. Exams were discussed as the most stressful thing in Year 9 and 10's lives, along with homework and not doing well generally with schoolwork. Friendship issues and peer pressure were also mentioned, a sense of not fitting in along with feeling restricted from independent activities. Aspects that make such stress worse included extra pressures from adults, and the school system as a whole. One participant mentioned social media as being a potential source of stress.

A small number of participants hinted at more harmful outcomes. Depression was highlighted as a possible risk, along with eating disorders and OCD, with two participants mentioning suicide. The major risks identified were done so by participants linked to the girls' independent grammar school and only one comprehensive school participant; no mental health problems were clearly identified by the participants linked with the boys' independent grammar school. One participant suggested a lack of awareness of the perfectionist to their own behaviours. No participants highlighted that perfectionists may be reluctant to seek help.

Thoughts on the changeability of perfectionism

Participants predominantly felt that perfectionism could change, even if it was considered part of who some people are, though were divided over whether they considered it to be easy or hard to change, and struggled to think of ideas that could help, despite providing lots of suggestions of ways to support students who are stressed or who may not feel proud of themselves (having breaks from work, relaxing with friends, watching TV, talking with someone older, praise, encouragement). There was a sense that it would be easier for someone who isn't a perfectionist to become one than it would be for someone who is a perfectionist to let go of their

perfectionism. One participant noted that it may depend how much of a perfectionist you are that determines how easy or difficult it is to change, with others suggesting how difficult it would be to promote lasting change.

A couple of participants alluded to possible barriers to change facing perfectionists, based on them enjoying getting things right and having things a certain way, and it seeming like a "very slippery slope" if they begin to become less perfectionist. One participant reflected that having to adapt to a new way of being could feel too much of a challenge for a perfectionist. A theme that emerged amongst a number of participants was in the description of perfectionism as being like an addiction.

Around a fifth of participants felt perfectionists shouldn't change and instead should be reassured that it's ok to be a perfectionist, and have the positive aspects of perfectionism discussed with them. A small minority of self-identifying perfectionists suggested that perfectionists shouldn't change, but rather be supported to manage their 'symptoms'. The large majority of participants said perfectionists should only change if it is having a negative impact on them. There was a strong sense within this that the choice for change had to come from within the perfectionist themselves. Around a third of participants felt perfectionists definitely should change to lower the pressures on themselves. Within these discussions, there was a clear theme of balance and the notion of a person not going completely to the other side (not-perfectionist).

A number of people admitted they couldn't think of anything that could help a perfectionist be less of a perfectionist, stating that it was difficult to think of anything when they themselves aren't perfectionists nor do they know any personally. The majority of participants however made suggestions of things that might help; there was an even split between ideas for self-help and ideas for others to help the individual. The majority of suggestions for self-help were things the individual could have some control over, such as doing more of the things they don't like doing, realisation and acceptance that things will be fine if they make a mistake and distinguishing between what is and isn't under their control, preparing oneself for change, learning relaxation techniques or coping mechanisms and noticing the time they would have for enjoyable things if they spent less time on work. A number of participants stated the perfectionist should learn to "let go" a little bit or "go with the flow", and learn not to worry or overanalyze, though struggled to think of steps towards these things. There was a handful of participants for whom there was a sense that the only way for some people to let go of perfectionist thinking would be if something drastic happened in their lives to severely alter the way they viewed the world, such as a major failure or accident, or something else outside their control such as others doing much better than them.

Regarding earlier, proactive intervention, there was a theme of helping perfectionists learn to cope with both mistakes and change, and more general mental health support in schools. One participant mentioned the need for governmental changes to address the impact of the pressures facing young people, and another talked about the pressures of the school day being eased if the contact hours were increased. There was a sense amongst participants that perfectionists had to 'accept' that things can't always be perfect, though an acknowledgement that this would be challenging for a perfectionist to assimilate.

The majority of suggestions were ideas that could be implemented by stakeholders (staff and families), for example one teacher had supported a student high in perfectionism by setting a target to make a mistake. Another had made special arrangements of time and technology to support a student whose perfectionism inhibited her writing. A small portion of participants referred to the need for outside help. All participants felt the provision of guidance from a psychology perspective to schools and families would be beneficial. There was great variety in what participants felt would be the most beneficial format for support. The most popular ideas were online/social media, some form of handout (leaflet, cards, book, letter…) and some form of discussion/presentation, either in a group or one to one. INSET was a popular idea amongst staff, and one student mentioned the idea of eye-catching posters.

Summary of gaps and *misconceptions* in the data

Gaps	*Misconceptions*
• perfectionists are at risk of not seeking help when needed • perfectionists are at risk of mental health conditions and even suicide • perfectionists are at risk of social isolation and may require support to build social support networks • schools can help maintain perfectionism or challenge it • families can help maintain perfectionism or challenge it • perfectionists may not be aware of their own perfectionist thoughts and behaviours • perfectionists may go unnoticed • perfectionists may need particular help with stress management and increasing their sense of pride • early intervention may help to prevent perfectionism	• Perfectionists are high-achievers (they may also be low achievers due to fear of failure preventing them taking risks in their learning, or by their abilities not matching their expectations. These are the more concerning students) • perfectionism is about academic work (it may be evident in any or all areas of a person's life, not just academically) • perfectionists are confident in their ability (they are likely to lack confidence despite perhaps appearing outwardly confident) • life is easy for perfectionists (many aspects of school and life present challenge to perfectionists, depending on their areas of value) • perfectionism is like a mental illness (perfectionism itself is not a mental illness but may contribute to mental illness) • perfectionism comes largely from upbringing (perfectionism arises from and is maintained by a combination of factors) • perfectionists will go on to do well in life (they might not necessarily go on to do well and achieve) • perfectionists should just let it go (they may need external support to challenge their perfectionist thoughts; this may not be as simple as "letting it go" but there may be clear small steps towards this that stakeholders can implement) • there is a stereotypical perfectionist (no two perfectionists are entirely alike; all perfectionists are unique individuals)

Questions for you to think about:

1. *Do you agree with the gaps and misconceptions I have identified; if not, which would you query and why?*
2. *Are there any gaps or misconceptions you would identify from the data that I have missed, from your perspective as a different professional?*
3. *Given this data, what ideas can you think of for intervention or prevention of problematic perfectionism? Does your profession have a particular approach that could help?*
4. *Do you foresee any challenges with these ideas, and if so, what are they and do you have any thoughts about how they may be best overcome?*
5. *From your understanding and experience, do you see a role for the Educational Psychologist here or is this the remit of other professionals? Do you see a role for multidisciplinary working here?*
6. *Are there any other thoughts you have or comments you'd like to make about the research or data?*

If you would like to discuss these questions in person, I would be happy to meet with you or arrange a telephone conversation at a mutually convenient time. Otherwise, I am happy to receive a written response. This can be as brief or detailed as you desire! Finally, if you would like to help with the later production of guidance I would be very willing to collaborate further, welcoming any ideas you may have.

Many thanks for your time and contributions! **Dawn**

Educational Psychologist Information and Consent Sheet (adapted from Cheney, 2014)

Perfectionism: Producing Guidance for Schools and Families

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The research is being conducted by Dawn Thorley, Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter, as part of a Doctorate in Educational, Child and Community Psychology. Dawn has previous training as a counsellor and teacher. The study has received full ethical clearance by the University of Exeter Graduate School of Education ethics committee.

What is the purpose of the study?

The first part of the study aimed to find out what different people know and understand about perfectionism and the pressures facing young people at school. This part has already been completed. The second part of the study will use this information to help produce guidance for schools and families for supporting students high in perfectionism. This is the part you are being invited to participate in.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's up to you whether or not to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason; all identifiable materials will be destroyed and your data removed from future analyses.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide you would like to take part in the study, you will sign and return a consent form agreeing to participate (or a named e-mail is fine), then I will send you a document to read via e-mail. The document contains a brief summary of the research findings and some questions for you to consider. It is up to you whether you would like to write the answers for me via e-mail/post, or speak with me either in person or over the telephone. If we speak, I will need to record our discussion so I can write down your ideas later.

Will my taking part be anonymous?

Yes. All information about your participation in the study will be anonymised. You can choose a pseudonym!

What will happen to the results of the study?

The data will be written up as part of professional postgraduate training at the University of Exeter. It is hoped that the information will be used to help find ways of supporting the emotional wellbeing of students who are high in perfectionism. If you are interested in finding out about the results of the study, the researcher will arrange a way to feed this back to you. If you would like to take part in a discussion to evaluate the guidance which is produced, please let the researcher know. Your input would be gratefully received!

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of the study, you should contact the researcher (dt295@exeter.ac.uk) who will do her best to answer your questions. Alternatively, you may prefer to contact her supervisor (Andrew Richards: A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk).

Will information about me be kept safely?

Yes. Information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and will have your name and e-mail address removed so you cannot be recognised from it. It will be destroyed after five years following completion of the project.

Perfectionism: Producing Guidance for Schools and Families

A research study towards a doctoral thesis.

Dawn Thorley (BSc, MSc, PGCE), Trainee Educational Psychologist

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, by contacting the researcher.
- If I have any concerns or questions about the research I would like to discuss, I can do so by contacting the researcher (details below). If I want to discuss these things with someone else, I can contact the researcher's supervisor (Andrew Richards, course director: A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk).
- My participation, e-mail address and phone number (where provided) will be kept strictly confidential. My contact details will be kept separately from my interview data and all my data will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act and destroyed after five years.
- My interview data will be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of my name, but reference only to the group of which I am a member.
- If we have a discussion that is recorded, my interview tape and transcript will be held in confidence, and not be used other than for the purposes described in the information sheet. Third parties will not be allowed access to them (except as may be required by the law). However, if I request it, I will be supplied with a copy of *my* interview transcript so that I can comment on and edit it as I see fit (please give your email below).

I agree to take part in the above study and to the use of my data for the purposes specified above.

Name of participant: …… Date:……

My professional role: ……

Signature (if sending by post, otherwise name above is sufficient): ……

I am happy to be contacted at a later date to take part in a focus group discussion about the guidance:

Yes/No

Name of researcher: Dawn Thorley Date: 12.10.15

Email: dt295@exeter.ac.uk

Phone: 07730 654926

Address: College of Social Sciences, Exeter University, Devon, UK.

Alternative contact: Andrew Richards (supervisor), A.J.Richards@exeter.ac.uk (address as above).

Perfectionism: Producing Guidance for Schools and Families. Educational Psychologists

Brief summary of the literature and aims of the study

Perfectionism has been linked with mental health conditions and suicidality in adults, but the research on perfectionism in children is limited, particularly in the UK. The literature on 'treating' perfectionism is mixed due to differing opinions on its cause, nature and changeability, with a current preference for Cognitive-Behavioural approaches. Some feel there could be 'adaptive' forms of perfectionism since it is commonly linked with high achievement, though other researchers believe all types of perfectionism are potentially harmful and should be challenged.

The first part of my research aimed to find out what a sample of 32 stakeholders (Year 9 and 10 students, teachers and parents from four high-achieving schools) think about perfectionism, with a view to identifying any gaps or *misconceptions* in knowledge or understanding which may contribute to increasing the risk of later mental health problems for students who are high in perfectionism. The second part of my research aims to produce guidance for schools and families to support such students, based on psychological theory. The first phase of this involved sharing the data with external professionals to gather a broad range of insights into the findings. The second phase of this involves discussing the production of guidance with Educational Psychologists.

Your role

You have been approached and kindly agreed to help with my study - many thanks! – as an Educational Psychologist with experience of producing guidance for schools. I am interested in your views on the production of guidance and any insights you may have relating this to my data. If you need any more information, please don't hesitate to ask!

What follows is a summary of the gaps and *misconceptions* identified from the interview data. There is also a brief account of the insights from external professionals. After reading the material below, I would be grateful if you would consider the following questions:

- What is your experience in producing guidance? (what guidance, what settings etc)
- What are the key things to know about producing guidance?
- What works well?
- What should I avoid?
- What have you learned from producing guidance that you wish you'd known before you started?
- What are the main challenges?
- What sorts of opportunities are there to produce guidance in the career of an EP?
- What experience have you of reviewing/evaluating your guidance?
- What are the possibilities or next steps following initial production of guidance?
- Given the data below from my research, what are your thoughts or tips on key priorities

Summary of gaps and *misconceptions* in the data

Gaps	*Misconceptions*
• perfectionists are at risk of not seeking help when needed • perfectionists are at risk of mental health conditions and even suicide • perfectionists are at risk of social isolation and may require support to build social support networks • schools can help maintain perfectionism or challenge it	• Perfectionists are high-achievers (they may also be low achievers due to fear of failure preventing them taking risks in their learning, or by their abilities not matching their expectations. These are perhaps the more concerning students) • perfectionism is about academic work (it may be evident in any or all areas of a person's life, not just academically) • perfectionists are confident in their ability (they are likely to lack confidence despite perhaps appearing outwardly confident) • life is easy for perfectionists (many aspects of school and life present challenge to perfectionists, depending on their areas of value)

• families can help maintain perfectionism or challenge it • perfectionists may not be aware of their own perfectionist thoughts and behaviours • perfectionists may go unnoticed • perfectionists may need particular help with stress management and increasing their sense of pride • early intervention may help to prevent perfectionism	• perfectionism is like a mental illness (perfectionism itself is not a mental illness but may contribute to mental illness) • perfectionism comes largely from upbringing (perfectionism arises from and is maintained by a combination of factors) • perfectionists will go on to do well in life (they might not necessarily go on to do well and achieve) • perfectionists should just let it go (they may need external support to challenge their perfectionist thoughts; this may not be as simple as "letting it go" but there may be clear small steps towards this that stakeholders can implement) • there is a stereotypical perfectionist (no two perfectionists are entirely alike; all perfectionists are unique individuals)

Insights from external professionals

(art psychotherapist, mental health nurse, cognitive-behavioural psychotherapist, specialist lead psychotherapy practitioner for personality disorders, integrative counsellor, CAMHS psychiatrist)

Perfectionism is…

- not wanting to be found lacking or not knowing
- a container for (and maintained by) anxiety, driven by fear, shame and rejection
- having an underlying low self-esteem
- not being adaptive to new ways of learning or allowing oneself to be vulnerable
- comparable with autism in terms of rigidity
- linked with perceived parental pressures/about seeking parental approval or attention
- created and/or exploited by schools
- believing failure makes one unlovable, so unable to make mistakes
- believing one is only seen and accepted as one's achievements rather than as a full human being; achievement used to reduce anxiety and gain temporary sense of worth
- creating expectations that are impossible to meet, therefore trapped in an awful cycle that leaves people feeling wretched
- a combination of cognitive errors; mental filtering, black-and-white thinking, "compare and despair"
- applicable to hobbies as well as academia, e.g. arts, music, sports etc, and also appearance e.g. images in magazines
- the belief that one should already know and not have to learn
- often seen in high-achieving older teens, putting huge pressures on themselves to perform to their best all the time

Risks for perfectionists are:

- becoming stuck academically, reduced capacity to reason
- inhibited creativity and experimentation
- finding it hard to connect with others/relationship difficulties
- struggling to believe praise and unlikely to seek feedback
- managing transitions, including changes in rules, boundaries or pressures
- conversion syndromes, e.g. headaches, stomach pain, feeling sick etc
- adjustment problems when faced with physical illness
- vulnerability for mental health issues: stress, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, obsessiveness, OCD
- not identifying one's own needs, or not able to communicate them
- eventual repeated patterns with own children

Considerations:

- parenting approaches, over-critical? Could we spot signs in parents that might raise our awareness of their children's needs? Do we have a duty to consider other children in the family? Support for family?

- sense of control when feeling powerless or unsupported, defence against anxiety?
- mirroring of perfectionism between pressurised staff and students; need for 'good enough' modelling? Support for teaching staff?
- may reap rewards in areas not requiring creativity?
- not within teacher's remit to support as lack training and time?
- when does it become pathological (thresholds)?
- personality patterns fixed by late adolescence: need for early intervention?

Interventions could be:

- use of art/music/play/talking therapeutic approaches; groupwork plus individual
- use of space to be 'messy' (an analogy for letting out the messy feelings they might be trying to repress with perfectionism)
- systemic approach involving child, family and school
- multi-disciplinary approach, though not necessarily involving psychiatry/medication
- a CBT type approach; mindfulness-based, involving exposure work, exploring feelings, appreciating the messiness of life and gaining acceptance that mistakes are ok, as well as exploring others' perceptions; psychoeducation regarding benefits and risks of perfectionism, and the development of coping skills for when things don't go perfectly
- teach children early on about thinking patterns; primary vs secondary school
- explore areas of worth outside of academic achievement; keep a 'positives log'
- continuums exercise of extremes, e.g. failure-success (what qualities associated with those and rate people they know and selves on the continuum); encourage to see the middle ground
- emphasis placed on processes rather than outcomes
- INSET to challenge staff beliefs that perfectionism is positive; use of activities to explore their own drivers, and the effects of process-focused teaching on outcomes, raising awareness of signs to look out for and when to refer on
- encourage student debates on areas of perfectionism, e.g. the perfect body
- Transactional Analysis; how drivers may cause problems
- raise staff as well as students' self-esteem
- talking opportunities with key attachment figure or external adult; naming what is happening for them (both their anxiety and their perspectives on relationships)

Challenges:

- trying to be 'perfect' at therapy
- making the discussions academic rather than personally meaningful
- need for high self-awareness, not easy with younger children whose developmental level may inhibit 'thinking about thinking'
- slow process; schools may struggle to offer the long-term support needed to contain the therapy
- resources; schools could see this as an unwanted expense
- how to involve parents and staff who may not feel that perfectionism is something to be tackled or do not feel able to tackle it
- engaging young people in therapy, competency to agree
- perfectionism often doesn't reach the attention of external professionals until it has become quite a complex mental health problem and therefore more challenging to 'treat'

8.9 Appendix I: Examples of constructs

Success and Happiness constructs

The letter 'P' is where the participant placed the 'average *perfectionist'*.

Lizzie^ (Y10)

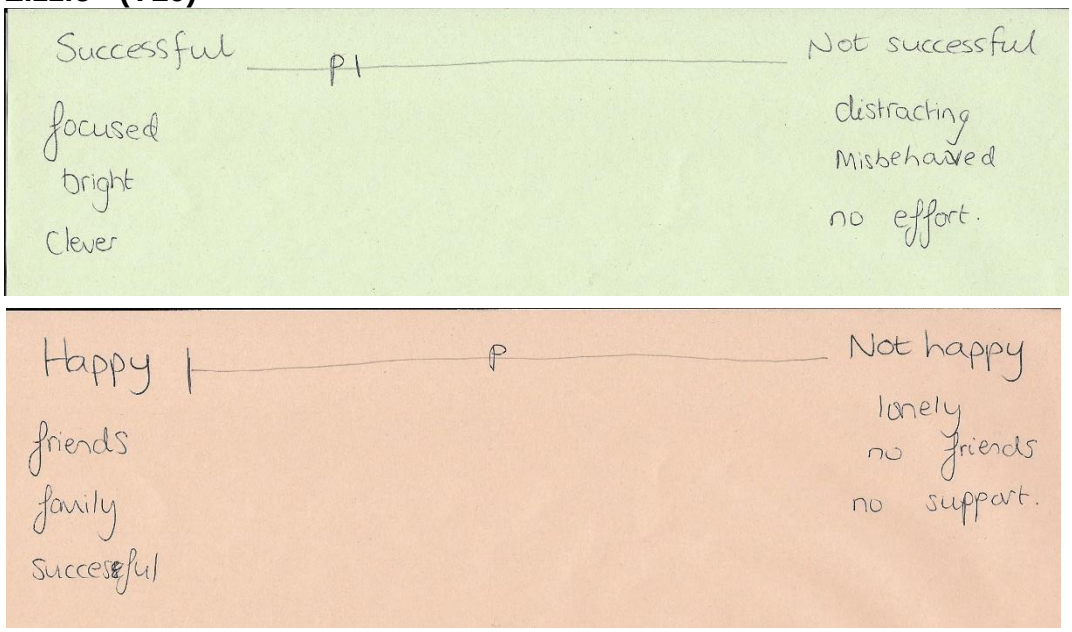


Figure 7. Example student success and happiness constructs.

Victoria (P)

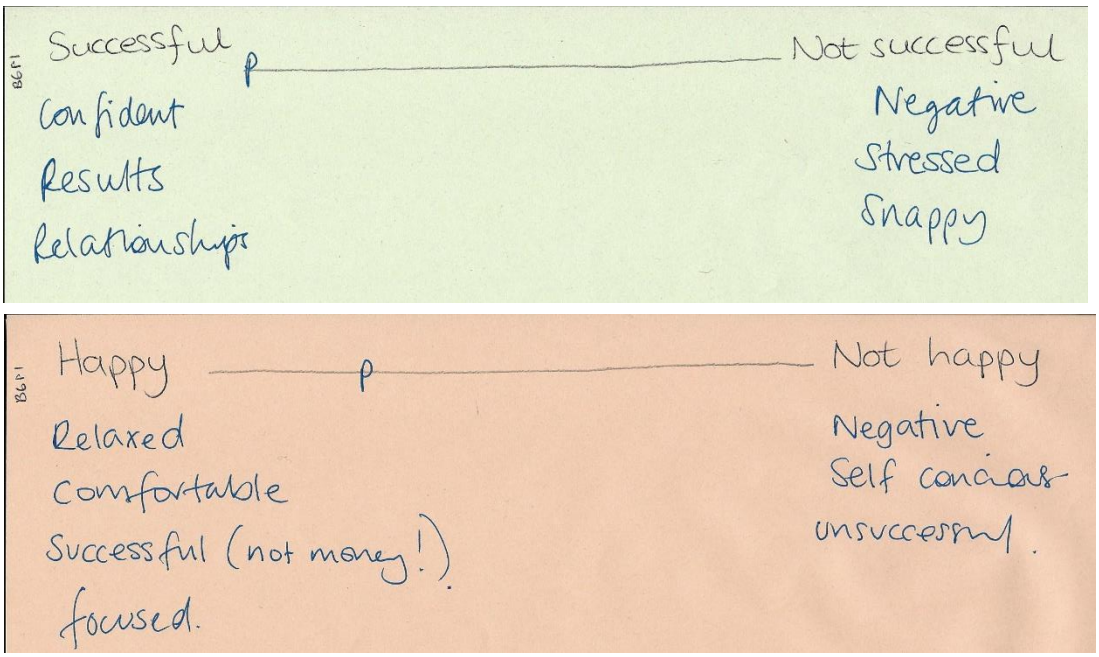


Figure 8. Example parent success and happiness constructs.

James (T)

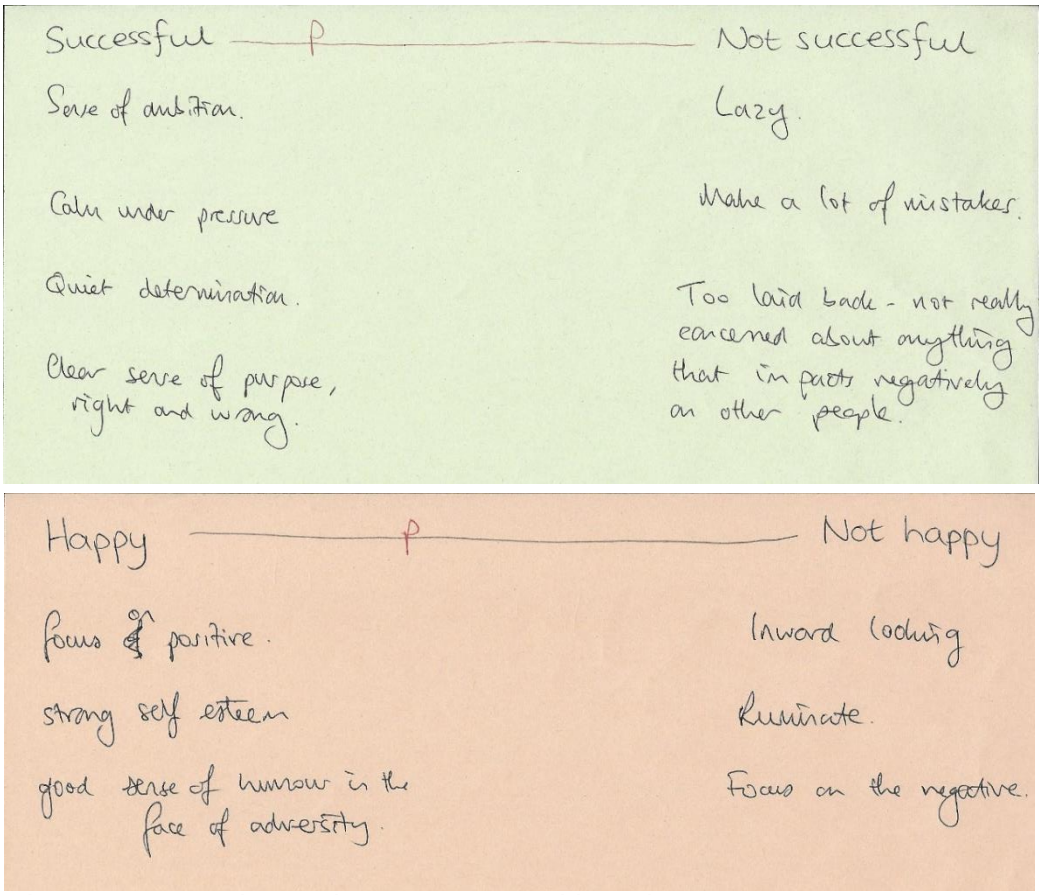


Figure 9. Example teacher success and happiness constructs.

As these three examples illustrate, the constructs for success and happiness are extremely personal to the individual. They also reveal a certain level of conflict when the participant was asked the following questions:

Is it possible to be:

- Successful and happy?
- Successful and not happy?
- Not successful and happy?
- Not successful and not happy?

Perfectionism **constructs**

Nadia^ (Y10)

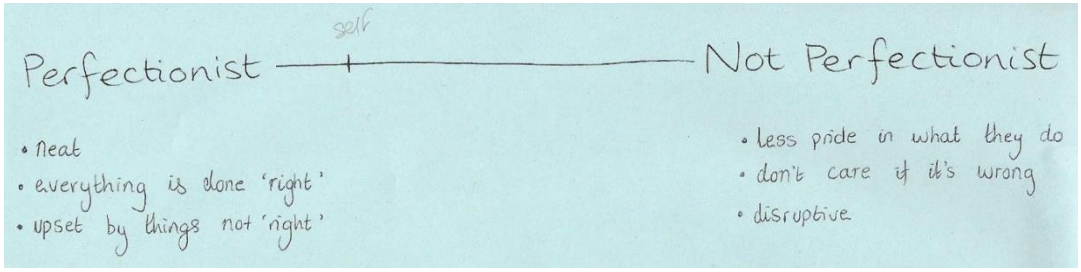


Figure 10. Example student *perfectionism* constructs.

Debbie^ (P)

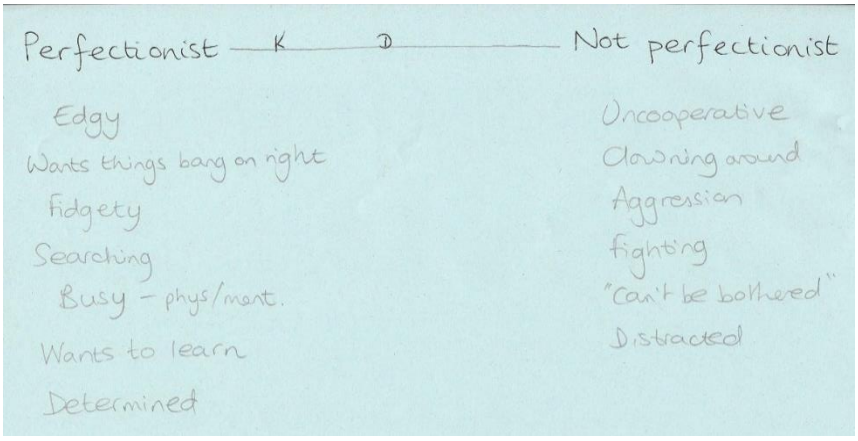


Figure 11. Example parent *perfectionism* constructs.

Claire (T)

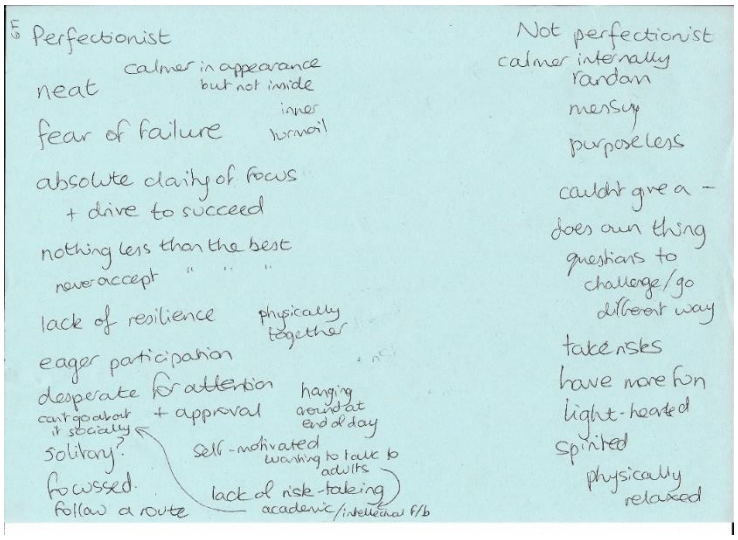


Figure 12. Example teacher *perfectionism* constructs.

8.10 Appendix J: Data analysis (Phase One)

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

The following is a short excerpt from Amy's (Y9) interview transcript. There is some early highlighting as I gained familiarity with key items in the data:

finally, leaving school, so you mentioned earlier about, you made the link with high achieving, and high achieving students often get on really well at school, what about leaving school, how might a perfectionist feel when it comes time to leave?

Er, definitely out of your comfort zone, in school you know where you stand, you know what it means to achieve in the schoo,I er I mean, in school you don't exactly get an award for being the happiest person (laughs) but after school that could be really important erm but I think if you are a perfectionist you definitely would've thought about what you were going to do after school, how it was going to be, then you definitely worry about whether that would actually happen

So that kind of preparation in your mind about it, that makes a lot of sense, thank you that's a good explanation. So we've got a really good sense of what a perfectionist might look like and how they might feel in different situations, how does somebody get to be like that, where does that come from?

I think it's mind-set, I don't, you can still...you can have perfection, there could be perfection everywhere, in your exams could be perfect, your friends, your relationship with your friends you're your family could be perfect, your family's perfect, but you could still not be a perfectionist, you could still be perfectly content if things weren't like that

Mm so it's something coming from inside?

Yeah

Your mind-set. And is mind-set something you're born with or do people help you achieve your mind-set?

(sighs)

Or is it a mixture of the two?

I think...its...I think like your personality is something that's difficult to change but at the same time it's difficult to say whether you're born with your personality or how much of your environment shaped it

Absolutely

I think with a perfectionist more than some other things it's shaped by your environment but at the same time you may be born with like tendencies

Absolutely and as a psychologist that's what we would say as well

(laughs)

A real mixture. Ok another line this is your final line, so here we've got someone who's a perfectionist and I want you to imagine now somebody who is absolutely not a perfectionist, what would somebody like that be like or what would they do so that you'd know that person is not a perfectionist?

Er

There might be someone on there that can prompt you

They could be content with what they were doing

Yeah, content with what they're doing

They wouldn't er, they would make their own perfection as opposed to fitting somebody else's

And that would come from their own imagination of what perfection should look like?

Yeah!

Figure 13. Example interview transcript (Phase One).

Following a thematic analysis of the whole interview for each participant, based initially somewhat superficially on questions asked, all the constructs for *perfectionist* and not *perfectionist* for each participant were then examined more specifically. These were grouped into the themes for *perfectionist* and 'not *perfectionist'* both physically and then through the use of technology (nVivo and word processing packages). The following images demonstrate the journey to arriving at more in-depth themes.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

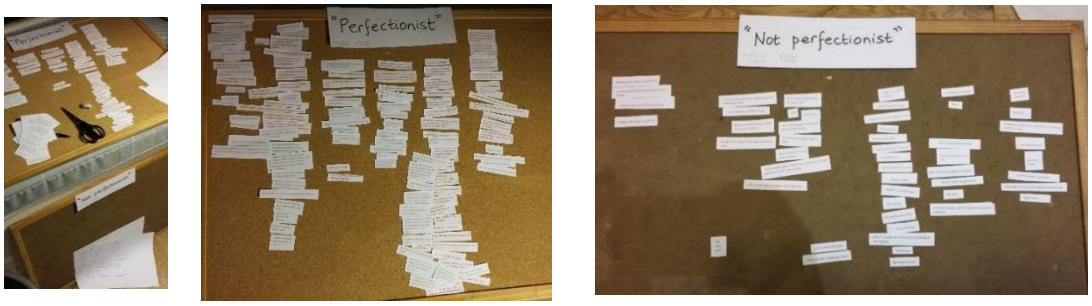
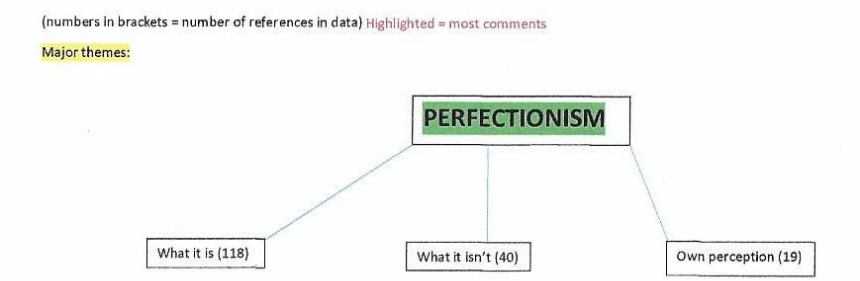


Figure 14. Generating initial codes (Phase One).

Phase 3: Searching for themes



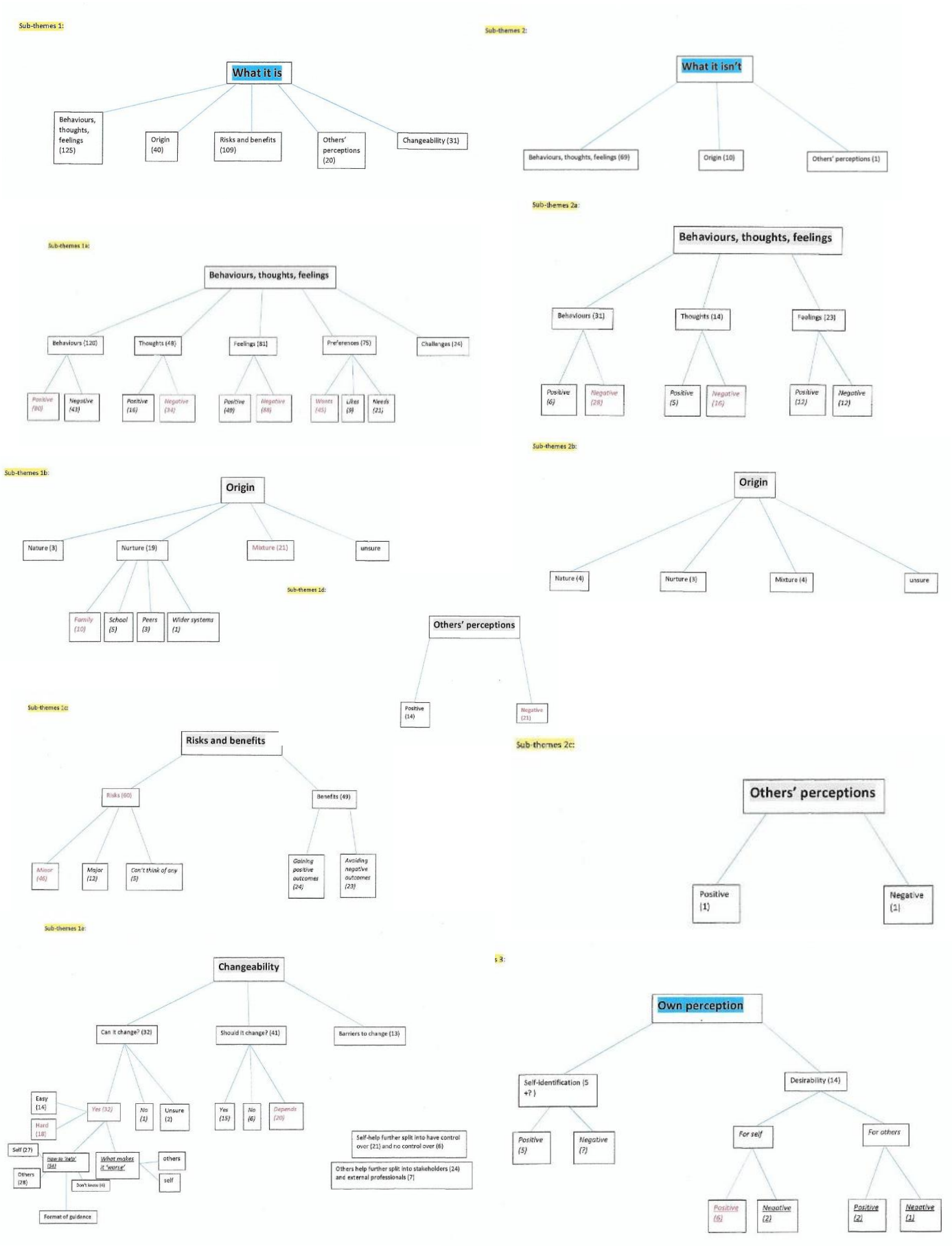


Figure 15. Searching for themes (Phase One).

Phase 4: Reviewing the themes

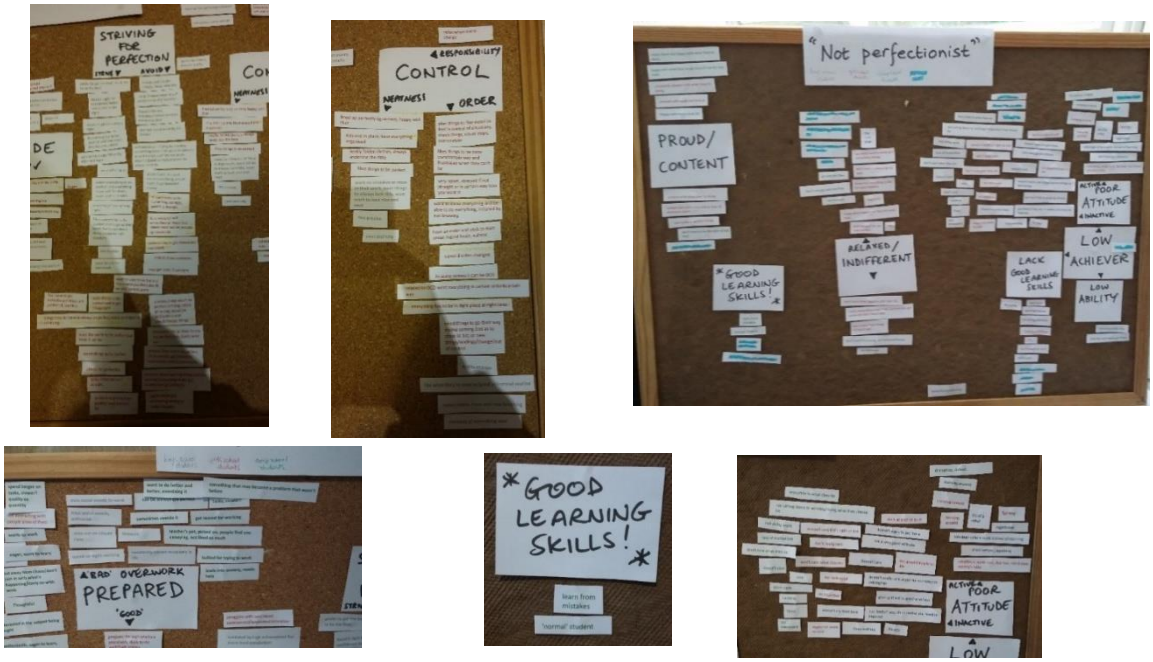


Figure 16. Reviewing the themes (Phase One).

A coding system was used to indicate the different participant groups for the analyses. These were as follows:

Student **Staff** Parent

Boys' School Girls' School Comprehensive Schools

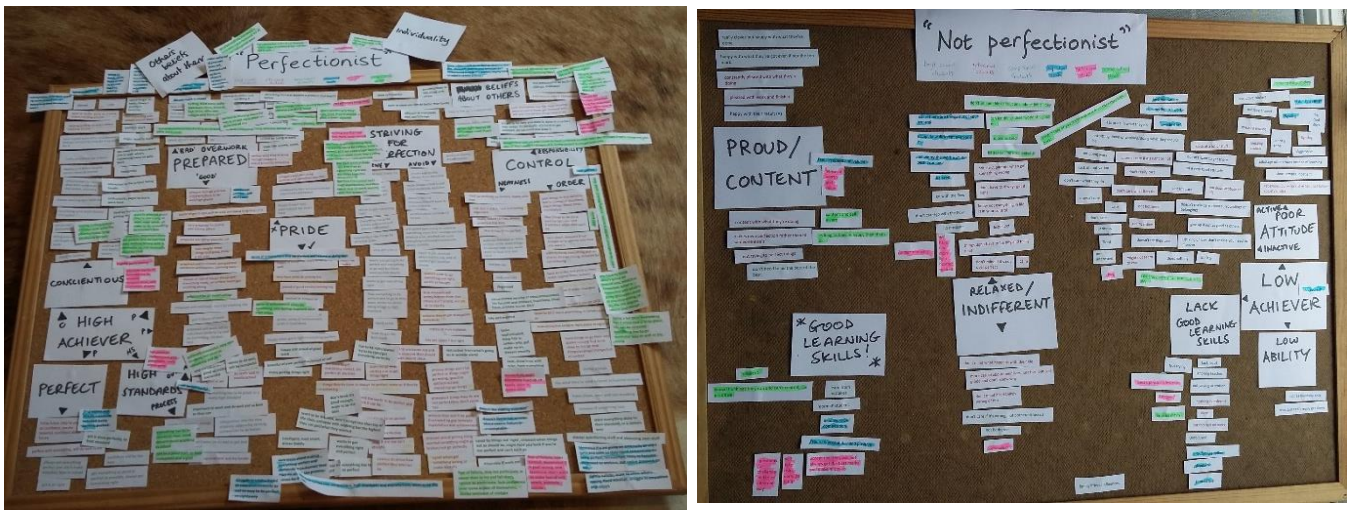


Figure 17. Coding the themes (Phase One).

Table 11 shows the themes of constructs assigned to the first answer provided by the participants, representing perhaps their 'gut feeling' about what this means and therefore perhaps their most guiding construct for their behaviour towards students high in *perfectionism*.

Table 11

First answer themes (perfectionist)

Theme assigned to constructs (number of respondents/32)	**Responses within theme**
High expectations and achievement (12)	achieve utmost best at whatever you do; to the best standard; to your best standard; get things right; perfect at everything; dislikes failure; nothing but the best; high expectations for self and others; right first time; critical; tries their best; eager to learn
Striving for perfection/getting it 'right' (11)	everything has to be perfect; wants things perfect; likes things to be perfect; strives for perfection; aims to have everything perfect and 100%; has to always be perfect; wants to get everything right; wants everything right; wants to get it right; has to be right; want to make sure that they do everything right
Need for order/control (7)	related to OCD want everything in certain order and a certain way; being a bit OCD; slightly anal; too precise; neat; everything has to be in right place at right time; neat
Anxious (2)	worries; edgy

Table 12 shows the whole range of constructs surrounding *perfectionist*, uncovered throughout the course of the interview. Some participants provided many constructs, and others provided only one or two, indicating a wider concept of *perfectionism* amongst some participants.

Table 12

All constructs of perfectionist

Theme assigned to constructs (number of responses/346)	**Example responses within theme**
High-achiever (98)	*Get it all right;* Get top marks all the time; *Will achieve and go far in life and get what they want;* **See more in independent girls' grammar schools, really clever girls; Generally successful, very able students;** Natural ability to be clever, will achieve goals, academic
Striving for perfection (79)	*Wants to get everything right; Wants things to be perfect; Everything has to be perfect;* **Nothing less than the best mark, never accept less than perfect;** Never think it's good enough, never satisfied, unhappy with less than perfect; Wants things bang on right
Hard worker (51)	*Put in hours of work; Perfect what they're doing through excessive practice;* **Meticulous, prepares self really well;** *Spend all night working; Always on top of things, always got everything ready;* **Prepared for all eventualities**

Control (50)	*Want things done your way, others are wrong; Want no mistakes or mess in their work, want things to always look tidy, want work to look nice and neat;* Slightly anal about doing everything; *Upset if order changed;* **Being a bit OCD, everything has a place and is in its place**
Pride (25)	*Happy and proud of good work;* Pleased with themselves; enjoy what they're doing, happy to learn, proud of what they've done; Really chuffed at coming first
Beliefs about others (21)	**Know others can't do as well as them;** *Push themselves way too much thinking parents expect more;* **believes that everyone else should do things right**
Others' beliefs about them (17)	*Bullied for trying to work;* Admired and resented by others; **Bit odd;** Others think they're keen and creeps
Individuality/Universality (5)	**Everybody has traits of *perfectionism* within them in certain areas and then not in others; All different**

The larger of the above themes were further divided, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13

Sub-themes (perfectionist)

Theme	**Sub-themes (number of responses)**	**Example responses within theme**
High-achiever	Conscientious (47)	*Doing everything they can to get the results they want*
	High standards (36)	*Everything has to be good, to a really high standard*
	Perfect (15)	*Perfect with everything*
Striving for perfection	Striving for perfection (44)	**You have to get everything right, everything has to be perfect**
	Avoiding failure (35)	*Doesn't want to do something not right, panics at the thought*
Control	Order (29)	*Hates chaos, mess and rule-breaking*
	Neatness (16)	*Neatly folded clothes, always underline the date*
	Responsibility (5)	**Things I have control over I have to have complete control over**
Beliefs about others	Expectations (10)	*Have to live up to expectations*
	Superiority (8)	*Thinks self superior*
	Attention seeking (3)	Trying to get teacher's attention
Pride	Satisfaction (18)	**Sense of achievement and satisfaction and reward at doing well**

	Self-doubt (7)	Very critical, dim view of self, lack confidence and esteem
Hard worker	Problematic (34) Prepared (17)	No time to relax and be happy *Prepared and confident, don't let anything slip*

Two of the larger of these sub-themes were able to be further divided:

Table 14

Further sub-themes (perfectionist)

Sub-theme (theme)	**Further sub-theme (number of responses)**	**Example responses within theme**
High standards (High-achiever)	Process (8)	*Wants to improve, always wants to get better*
	Outcome (28)	**Will be successful**
Problematic (Hard worker)	Social impact (9)	Not enjoy social events as feel should be working, become isolated as drive people away
	Emotional impact (25)	Panic attacks, stress, havoc, turmoil

The first response of participants to the question 'what is a non-*perfectionist*?' are grouped into themes as shown in Table 15, again reflecting the idea that the first response perhaps represents the participants' 'gut feeling' and therefore the likely driver for their behaviour towards such individuals.

Table 15

First answer themes ('not perfectionist')

Theme assigned to 'not-*perfectionist*' constructs (number of respondents/32)	**Responses within theme**
Poor attitude (14)	Sabotage others' work instead of learning; Aggressive; Uncooperative; Not trying; Just kind of lazy; Don't really care; Don't care what they do; Not bothered; Laziness; Doesn't care; Less pride in what they do; Switched off; Doesn't care; Don't really care about much in life
Lack of learning skills (10)	Minimum effort; Ignoring the teacher; Not focused on their work; Unfocused; Distractible; Little bit messy; Unorganised; No concentration; Dreamer/unfocused; Think it's correct when it isn't
Contented (7)	Content with what they're doing; Things don't have to be tidy and really neat; Go with the flow; Calmer internally; Don't sit and think about a job undone all day; Not critical about their own work; Human
Low ability (1)	Not as mentally able

The above coding system was again used and Table 16 shows the whole range of constructs surrounding 'non-*perfectionist*', uncovered throughout the course of the interview. Some participants provided many constructs, and others provided only

one or two, again indicating a wider concept of *not perfectionism* amongst some participants.

Table 16

All constructs of 'not perfectionist'

Theme assigned to 'not *perfectionist'* constructs (number of responses/169)	**Example responses within theme**
Poor attitude (64)	*Short temper, impatient; rebellious and not following society's rules; Disruptive, violent;* **Switched off; Lazy; Doesn't care;** Can't be bothered; Not motivated in what they're doing; Don't have the standards
Contented (57)	*Content with what they're doing; Go with the flow;* **Know there are things out of your control; Will have more fun, more spirited and light-hearted; More relaxed;** Happy being the way they are; Their best is good enough; Happier, don't worry, feel comfortable with themselves
Learning skills (41)	*Learn from mistakes;* **Will take risks, dare, go for it; Resilient;** Know it's ok to be imperfect; *Not paying attention; Nothing is ordered;* **Lacks self-discipline; Random;** Don't try their best

Pride (5)	*Constantly pleased with what they're doing; Happy with what they've got even if it's not the top mark; Happy with their A-grade result*
Low ability (3)	*Not as mentally able; Tries but can't really get there*
Influences (2)	*Family/friend influences;* People don't expect them to be perfect

The larger of the above themes were further divided:

Table 17

Subthemes ('non-perfectionist')

Theme	**Sub-themes (responses)**	**Example responses within theme**
Poor attitude	Active (21)	Clowning around; **Distracting others;** *Fighting*
	Passive (43)	Can't be bothered; Not motivated in what they're doing
Content	Relaxed (49)	*Calm;* Able to chill
	Indifferent (6)	*Don't mind if get things wrong or not; Not bothered*
	Accepted (2)	**Feel accepted and valued; Sense of worth and value**
Learning skills	Good (18)	**Know the things they can and can't control, can then prioritise;** Have a balance between concentrating and doing a good job, and relaxing a bit and having fun
	Lacking (23)	Unorganised; *Not paying attention*

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

A narrative account now summarises the key findings to answer the research question and sub-questions in more detail and make further sense of the data presented above, beginning with question **1a: What is a *perfectionist*?** This is separated into the following named themes which emerged from the discussions:

a. what a *perfectionist* is

b. behaviours associated with *perfectionism*

c. thoughts associated with *perfectionism*

d. feelings associated with *perfectionism*

e. preferences of *perfectionists*

f. challenges for *perfectionists*

g. desirability of *perfectionism*

Qualitative data

a. What a perfectionist is

The Blob classroom activity generated a clear stereotype of the *perfectionist*; one sat concentrating on their work while all around them is chaotic. There was a strong sense that *perfectionists* are diligent and will practise excessively to improve their performance. There was also a recurring theme of anxiety. Very few participants explored the idea of *perfectionism* in different areas of a person's life, making the assumption either that it related entirely to schoolwork, or that it was consistent across all areas of the individual's life. A number of participants perceived

perfectionists to be prepared and confident, so not suffering from anxiety and stress at times when 'non-*perfectionists'* might (e.g. exams). The overall theme was of someone who wants things to be perfect and may be upset if they aren't; this was consistent across schools and type of participant. There was also a strong sense that *perfectionists* are usually high-achievers, although one student (Amy, Y9) and one teacher (Michelle) highlighted the possibility that some *perfectionists* may refuse to participate for fear of failure and that could lead to low achievement:

> you know even thinking about the students I said about before who don't try, you know part of the reason they don't try is fear of failure, which arguably means that they have these high, these expectations which they feel that they themselves can't meet. So it's easier to not participate than to try and fall short I guess.

There was no clear identification by any participants that *perfectionists* might struggle to seek help when needed; the closest hints of this came from participants self-identifying as *perfectionists*;

> although they'll be quite competitive I think they'll tend to be quite introverted (James, T)
>
> usually you're very sensitive being a *perfectionist* and if you fail you really take it to, it's like you've lost everything (Joel^, P)
>
> I think maybe sometimes as well you might not tell that somebody might be a *perfectionist* because again it might be something you don't feel comfortable talking about to people (Jessica, Y10).

On the whole, a 'not *perfectionist'* was perceived generally as someone with largely negative characteristics, but who was more content than a *perfectionist*. A definite stereotype emerged from the Blob classroom activity; a 'not *perfectionist'* in the majority of participants' eyes was one of the non-conforming and even disruptive students in the picture. This lends evidence to the construct of *perfectionist* as being more of a 'model student'.

One teacher noted:

> … I think everyone at some point is a *perfectionist*. I think we all have our traits (Julia, T),

highlighting the notion perhaps of *perfectionism* as a spectrum that we move along at different times in our life.

b. Behaviours associated with perfectionism

A couple of students noted that perhaps there won't be any clear outward signs that someone is a *perfectionist*, however the majority of participants suggested clear behavioural clues. The majority of behaviours mentioned could be considered 'positive' learner characteristics, such as concentrating, improving their performance, working hard, being inquisitive, prepared, excelling, organised, conscientious, neat, tidy, demonstrating self-control, focused and eager to learn.

The more negatively-themed behaviours, though far fewer, were around someone who perhaps gloats over their achievements, maybe cheats to ensure they get things correct, becomes outwardly angry when others disrupt their learning, makes self-critical comments, doesn't sleep through anxiety, takes too long on tasks, is attention-seeking, edgy, fussy, frets, misses out on social or leisure activities, and cries when things are not to their standard. One parent referred to such individuals as "*not human*" (Dave^, P) in their behaviour due to not appearing to make mistakes, and a student used the term "*annoyingly perfect*" (Nadia^, Y10).

The behaviours of a 'non-*perfectionist'* were largely negative; a major theme being laziness and lacking self-discipline, concentration and focus:

> they certainly don't, you know, try to do their best (Joel^, P)

> just…not a very good attitude (Harry, Y10).

However there were a few positive associations made:

> Well some people might follow them like sheep because they're the cool guys (Brad, Y9)
>
> Questions, questions for challenge, questions to go in a different way. A 'non-*perfectionist'* will take a risk and "go hang, if it goes wrong it's fun!" (Claire, T).

This last comment perhaps reflects the idea of a growth mindset in learning and someone who is willing to take risks. This perhaps echoes the first comment, with students taking risks perhaps being perceived more favourably by their peers and therefore perhaps enjoying more social success.

c. Thoughts associated with perfectionism

In a reversal of the behaviours noted, the *perfectionist* thoughts mentioned were predominantly negative. These included holding unrealistic expectations, critically comparing to others, lacking self-belief, paranoia, critical self-messages around failure, self-induced pressure, being outcome- rather than process-focussed, over-attention to mistakes rather than successes, obsessiveness and never accepting anything less than perfect. One parent, self-identifying as a *perfectionist*, stated the following when discussing making mistakes:

> You could kick yourself, you think "my goodness" and because you're so sensitive and also *perfectionist* it's really, some kids would be "oh well that's how it goes" but *perfectionism* goes with the very fact that you've messed something up, it's a torment really (Joel^, P).

Two powerful key words stood out as highlighting the negative thoughts of *perfectionists*:

> you can see the **turmoil** in the head there going round (Sally^, P); the inner **turmoil** (Claire, T)
>
> My daughter's **tormented** by it to be honest (Joel^, P).

More positively-themed thoughts were having confidence in their abilities, being pleased with achievements, being driven and motivated, having orderly plans and a sense of purpose, positive self-talk, and wanting to learn. However, there was a sense that these may come at the expense of social inclusion, for example the following comment reflects a major theme amongst participants regarding *perfectionist* thoughts:

> Well he's sitting over his paper with his pencil back drawn, er…turned to everyone else not bothered by paper being chucked at his head. So obviously wants to finish something or thinking "we have a task and they're all being naughty and I'm the only one being good!" (Jane^, P).

The thoughts attributed to 'non-*perfectionists'* were also largely negative. For example, many participants suggested that someone who is not a *perfectionist* doesn't care. A couple of participants highlighted that although 'non-*perfectionists'* might show they don't care, really they do care underneath (Isabelle, Y10, Jane^, P). On the whole, these individuals were considered to have lower expectations:

> They don't have the standards (Joel^, P).

The more positive thoughts of 'non-*perfectionists'* were perceived as being less critical of themselves and others, and being more "*go with the flow*" (Grace^, Y10). These perhaps indicate the powerful constructs of conscientiousness and being critical for *perfectionists*.

d. Feelings associated with perfectionism

The feelings described for *perfectionists* were also predominantly negative, such as reflected in this comment:

> They want to do well, and that generates pressure which generates anxiety. Erm…they'll probably suffer with a few more physical symptoms than other sort of…other people that don't have that sense of *perfectionism* (James, T).

The main feelings that arose were nervousness or worry, with mention also of disappointment, apprehension, dread, panic, upset, stressed, exhausted, scared, terrified, annoyed, irritated, frustrated, angry, uncertain, angst, distressed and misery. The following comment by a teacher captures the belief expressed by many participants:

> a true *perfectionist* will never ever accept anything less than perfect, never accept that, and if it does go wrong, will cry, will be devastated (Claire, T).

A parent described the feelings of his daughter and son;

> (name) gets frustrated when she doesn't find things easy and she has to think and work at something and it doesn't come naturally she gets incredibly upset;
>
> he's not very good at maths so he has no other choice but to work at it and he finds that really really frustrating (Dave^, P).

The more positive feelings discussed were confidence, validation, satisfaction, calm, comfortable, pleased, happiness, pride and excitement, of which confidence was by far the most frequently occurring.

Most participants recognised that there is likely to be a mixture of feelings for *perfectionists*, with one participant describing the range that might arise for a *perfectionist* completing a school project;

> At the start they'll be happy because it's something they can get their teeth into, halfway through they'll be really miffed off, really annoyed, erm just before the end or the hand in date they'll be panicking to the most extreme limits possible, just after it's handed in they'll feel a slight sense of calm then they'll start going "oh!" All the things that could've gone wrong will come into their head and then once they get it back, "ooh!" Unless it was a bad score in which case "argh!" (Charlie, Y10).

Unlike behaviours and thoughts, the feelings ascribed to 'non-*perfectionists*' were split equally between positive and negative; there was a theme of contentment, light-heartedness and being laid-back. More negatively, participants believed 'non-*perfectionists*' wouldn't be bothered and would lack a sense of care about what they are doing. These imply a mixture of constructs for *perfectionism*, indicating perhaps

an uptight nature but caring greatly about what they do. The sense is perhaps that caring about what one does comes at the expense of relaxation.

e. Preferences of perfectionists

There was a sense that *perfectionists* like things to be perfect, or at least done in a certain way. Some participants believed *perfectionists* would like new challenges and experiences such as homework or exams, as opportunities in which they could thrive and show-off their abilities. Most participants felt *perfectionists* want things to be right, want to know everything and want to do or be the best possible. There was frequent mention of what *perfectionists* 'have to' do, reflecting perhaps a need and therefore a stronger assertion than their likes or wants;

> Everything has to be like perfect and it has to be exact and precise (Brad, Y9)
>
> everything has to be good, to a really high standard (Matt, Y9)
>
> everything has to be like in the right place at the right time (Harriet^, Y9)
>
> It just means nothing but the best…a *perfectionist* could be whether it's their appearance erm you know their hair has to be right, their makeup has to be right, that's erm all that they, if they do a job it has to be absolutely right but just you know…striving for perfection (Sandra^, P)
>
> they have to come first, they have to be the best (Lizzie^, Y10)
>
> Where everything has to be perfect, everything has to be done right (Nadia^, Y10)
>
> to be a *perfectionist* you have to know what's going on around you, what has happened, what is happening and what is going to happen (Delta, T).

There was a strong theme from this of a need for order and control for *perfectionists*, for example;

> I think control is a big part of it, I think, so in that respect I'm very much like, the things I have control over I have to have complete control over (Delta, T)

with one participant likening it to autism:

> might be slightly autistic because they're so meticulous…and they care more about making everything perfect and immaculate…than they do about the process (Marie, T).

However, when asked questions about why those things are important to a *perfectionist*, participants were unable to explore deeper than *perfectionists* just liking it that way and being upset if it's not. This perhaps suggests a lack of awareness of the possible function of such aspects of *perfectionism* and a resignation that that is perhaps just the way it is, reflecting very much a trait theory of *perfectionism*.

f. Challenges for perfectionists

The majority of participants could identify experiences which may be challenging to a *perfectionist*, highlighting within their comments areas *perfectionists* dislike or may struggle with due to their perceived need. Areas of dislike were entirely based around mistakes and failure. The dominant theme of challenge was areas in which expectations may be high for the *perfectionist*, such as exams, a performance or homework, and another theme for many participants was the consideration of times of change, such as leaving school. The main discourse was around *perfectionists* liking to have things under their control, so anything perceived as a threat to that could be a challenge for them. Particular examples were unstructured environments such as a house party, or even groupwork:

> So if you have to work in a group of, like if you're all kind of the same type of person it's alright but varied like abilities and varied opinions and everything, if you want things done your way and the right way, those other people you have to listen to their input but they're technically wrong? (Nadia^, Y10).

All participants felt coming second place in something would be perceived as a failure for *perfectionists*, supporting the assertion that *perfectionists* feel they must be the best. The self-identifying *perfectionist* parent also insightfully mentioned the following challenge:

sometimes I think you don't get over something you've made a mistake at (Joel^, P)

suggesting not only the anticipation of events outside their control, and the taking part in something perceived to be outside their control, but also that post-event may present a unique challenge for a *perfectionist* in not being able to move on from a perceived mistake. However, again participants were unable to express why making mistakes might be such a bad thing for a *perfectionist*, returning again to the theme of them not liking it and it making them upset. When it was suggested that most people don't like making mistakes and that is in fact what may motivate us to persevere with our learning, the general sense was that *perfectionists* just don't like it even more because that's just the way they are. This again reflects a trait theory of *perfectionism* and perhaps suggests a reluctance amongst participants to dig deeper into the function of behaviours when presented with *perfectionist* students.

Reflecting the constructs of 'confident' and 'organised', a number of participants felt *perfectionists* would not find exams, homework, upcoming performances or leaving school to be a challenge, and as mentioned above, no one identified 'asking for help' as a challenge relating to their *perfectionism* constructs.

g. Desirability of perfectionism

Some of the teachers discussed the fact that for them, a *perfectionist* student would be their ideal student due to their perceived desirable characteristics, particularly towards learning. This lends support to the notion that *perfectionism* may be maintained in schools, as teachers who perceive *perfectionist* students as 'ideal' are

likely to reinforce behaviours they perceive as relating to *perfectionism* and hence perpetuate the characteristic.

When discussing their ideal self, it was notable that the majority of the boys would like to be more *perfectionist* than they currently are, evidently perceiving it as a predominantly positive trait, for example:

> Because I do think, I think sometimes in exams I should be even more bothered about my exams (Harry, Y10).

This is pertinent since the boys largely perceived *perfectionists* to be successful, but unhappy, for example:

> I think you'd really struggle to be happy as a *perfectionist* (Matt, Y9).

The remaining boys were happy as they are, placing themselves relatively highly up the *perfectionism* scale. Half of the girls wanted to be less of a *perfectionist*, perceiving it perhaps more negatively, although the majority of girls perceived *perfectionists* to be both successful and reasonably happy. The other half of girls felt happy as they are; all had rated themselves relatively highly as well. The suggestion from this is perhaps a low awareness of the potential risks or negative connotations associated with *perfectionism*, or perhaps a confusion between high achievement and *perfectionism*. However, it may also suggest that despite recognition and acknowledgement of both positive and negative aspects of *perfectionism*, higher value is being placed on certain characteristics (such as success) than others (such as relaxation and a healthy social life). This is summarised eloquently by one self-identifying student:

> I mean, in school you don't exactly get an award for being the happiest person (laughs) (Amy^, Y9).

In this case, external reinforcement appears to be a powerful motivator for what is valued and striven for. The teacher who self-identified as *perfectionist* expressed a clear desire to change:

> I wish I were less of a *perfectionist* to be honest (laughs) (James, T).

One parent expressed the following:

> I would still hope and claim and hold up that a little bit of *perfectionism* and a little bit of positive attitude should gain you some happiness in life so I would favour going towards *perfectionism* (laughs) (Jane^, P)

indicating that parents may perceive *perfectionism* to be a positive characteristic and therefore reinforce associated behaviours in their children.

The parent who self-identified as high in *perfectionism* expressed the following conflict when discussing whether he could be more of what he perceived to be a 'non-*perfectionist'*:

> I think in some ways they're probably happy, happier because they don't worry, they might have the different priorities you see you know, but I've, I couldn't be like that. I say to my wife "I couldn't be like that, I couldn't" (Joel^, P).

This comment reflected almost a sense of panic at the thought of changing towards the perceived 'non-*perfectionist'* and represents a significant barrier to change. It also reflects dichotomous thinking; the sense that one is either one thing or the other rather than acknowledging all the steps in between.

When discussing making mistakes, the majority of participants felt there is no such thing as someone who doesn't make mistakes, although a few considered the idea. There was a mixture of positive:

> Very lucky people! Erm…Little bit jealous of them to be honest! (laughs) I suppose if you never made a mistake you would be one of the richest people on the planet (Harry, Y10)
>
> *Perfectionists*? Er…well must work really, really hard to get that good, so I guess they have worked for it so you can't say…that…they have well they've worked for it haven't they so they deserve to get that far (Matt, Y9)

and more negative interpretations:

> Well…quite annoying, like if somebody say if someone says they're normal they've got no problems or conditions it's weird and strange (Isabelle, Y10)
>
> they're not human like…! To be human you have to like feel emotions and make mistakes because no one is really perfect (Harriet^, Y9)
>
> Erm…I think that must be that must be quite difficult because erm that's a massive amount of expectation erm and a massive amount of, of pressure and it can be fun learning to, you know it can be fun getting it wrong and if you get it right all the time every time there can be no feeling of achievement or satisfaction because that's been the expectation erm so yeah I wouldn't like to be that, well I'm far from that person I'll never be that person. But I think that'd be very difficult (Sandra^, P)
>
> …well…it can be quite annoying if someone's like always immaculate at everything, I think everyone does make mistakes sometimes you might just not always see that (Charlotte, Y10).

Hence there were differing views on whether it is possible to be 'perfect' or not, reflecting perhaps a maintaining factor for *perfectionism* for those who believe it is possible and view it as desirable.

Quantitative data

Figure 18 shows the themes for participants' first response to the question "what is a *perfectionist*?" linking well with the findings in the literature that *perfectionists* a) strive for perfection and b) demonstrate high expectations.

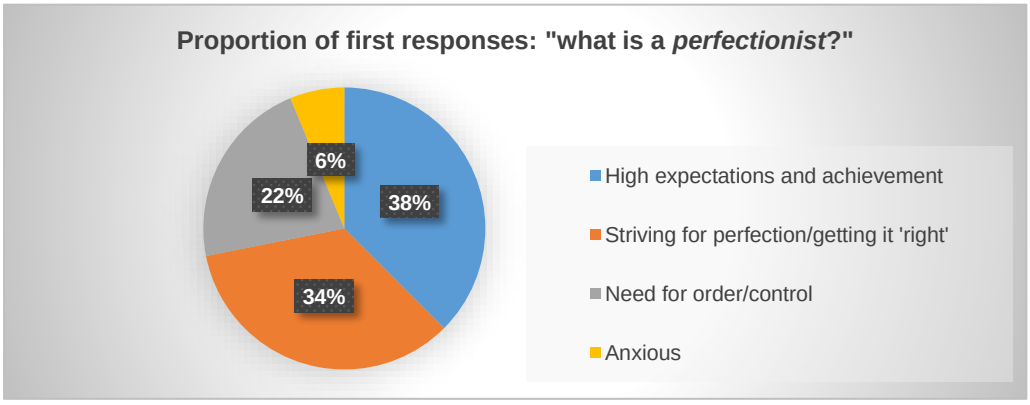


Figure 18. Proportion of first responses: "what is a *perfectionist*?".

Figure 19 shows the diverse themes of the whole range of constructs surrounding *perfectionist*, uncovered throughout the course of the interview. Some participants provided many constructs, and others provided only one or two, indicating a wider concept of *perfectionism* amongst some participants.

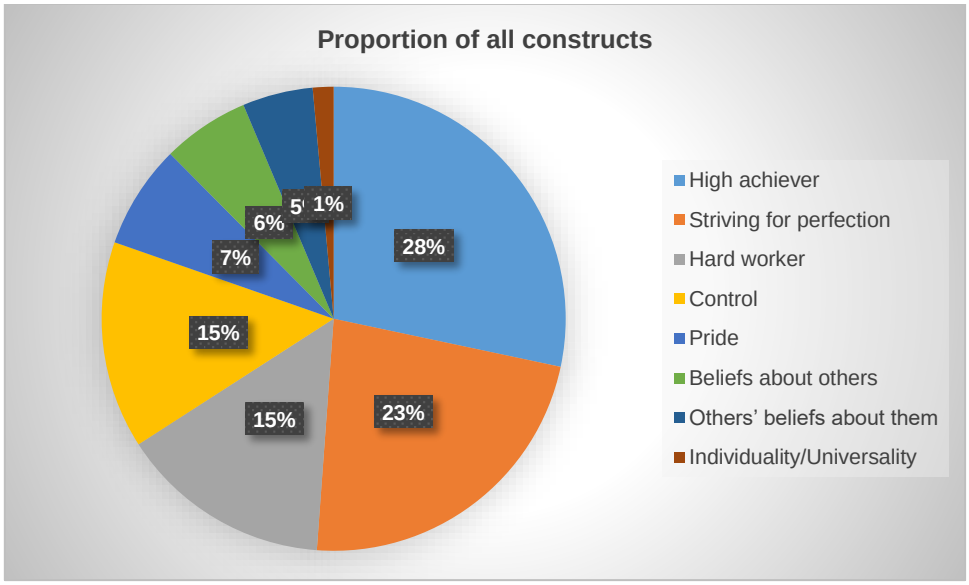


Figure 19. Proportion of all *perfectionism* constructs.

When further sub-themed, Figure 20 shows the diverse range of constructs. The new observation here is the dominance of 'positive' themes.

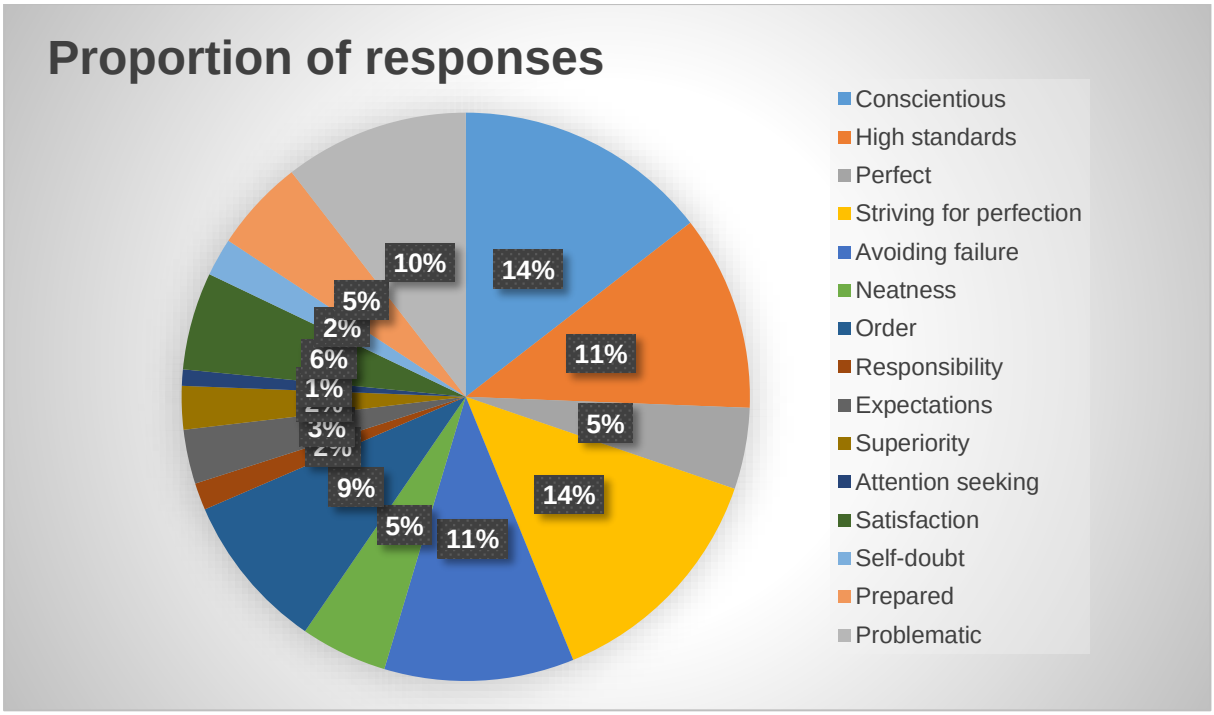


Figure 20. Diversity of *perfectionism* constructs.

These charts highlight the range of knowledge and understanding of participants relating to *perfectionism*, some of which link well to the current literature, and some of which reflect more traditional stereotypes of the term. The diversity of responses highlight the different emphasis each participant placed on the construct of *perfectionism* and gives an indication that understanding of and response to students with *perfectionist* behaviours is likely to be as varied as the themes uncovered.

To further understand participants' constructions of *perfectionism*, 'not *perfectionism'* was also explored. Figure 21 visually shows the participants' immediate reaction to the question "what is a non-*perfectionist*?" and highlights that this was much more 'negative' than *perfectionist*. Unlike *perfectionism*, *not perfectionism* yielded much more homogenous groupings of themes, suggesting a much more consistent perception of a 'non-*perfectionist'* amongst the participants in the study. However,

around a fifth of responses highlighted a sense of contentment amongst people who are 'non-*perfectionists'*.

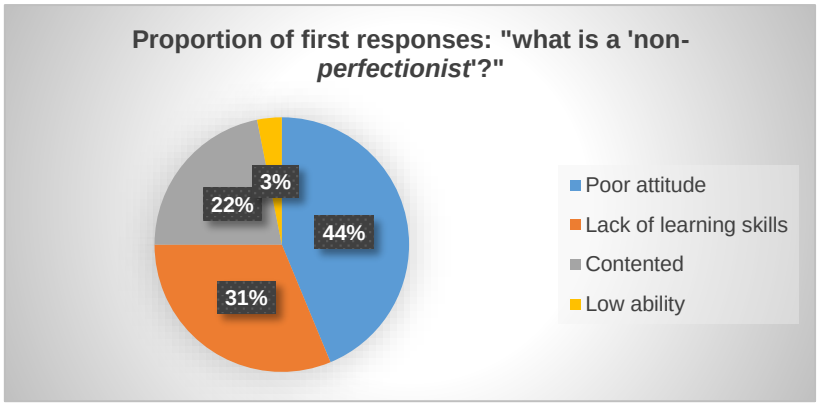


Figure 21. Proportion of first responses: "what is a 'non-*perfectionist'*?.

When sub-themed, the similarity of responses is clear, as shown in Figure 22:

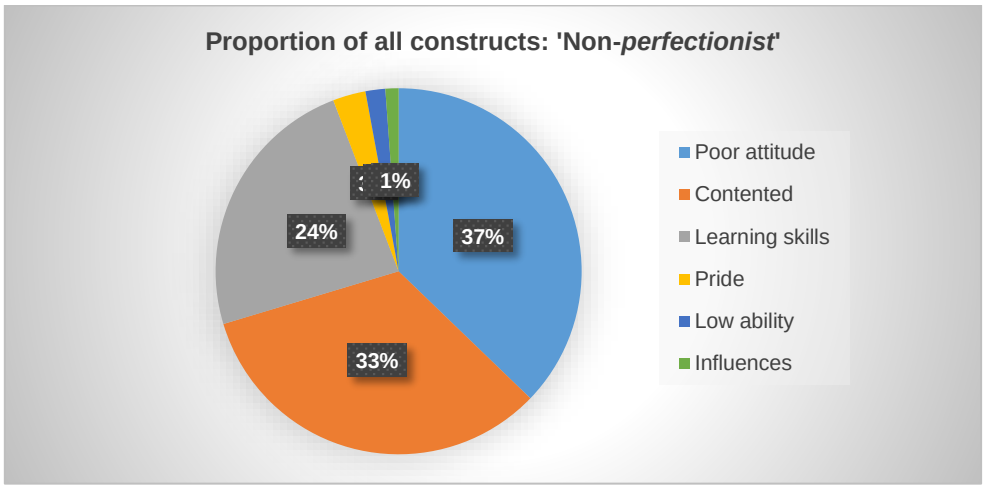


Figure 22. Proportion of all 'non-*perfectionist'* constructs.

This clearly shows that the theme of contentment was increased in popularity when all constructs were gathered, accounting for around a third of all responses from participants. This theme was very close behind the dominant theme of 'poor attitude', representing a sense of a 'non-*perfectionist'* as someone with a poor attitude who is nevertheless contented.

Figure 23 again shows the limited range of constructs for 'not *perfectionist*', compared with *perfectionist* above:

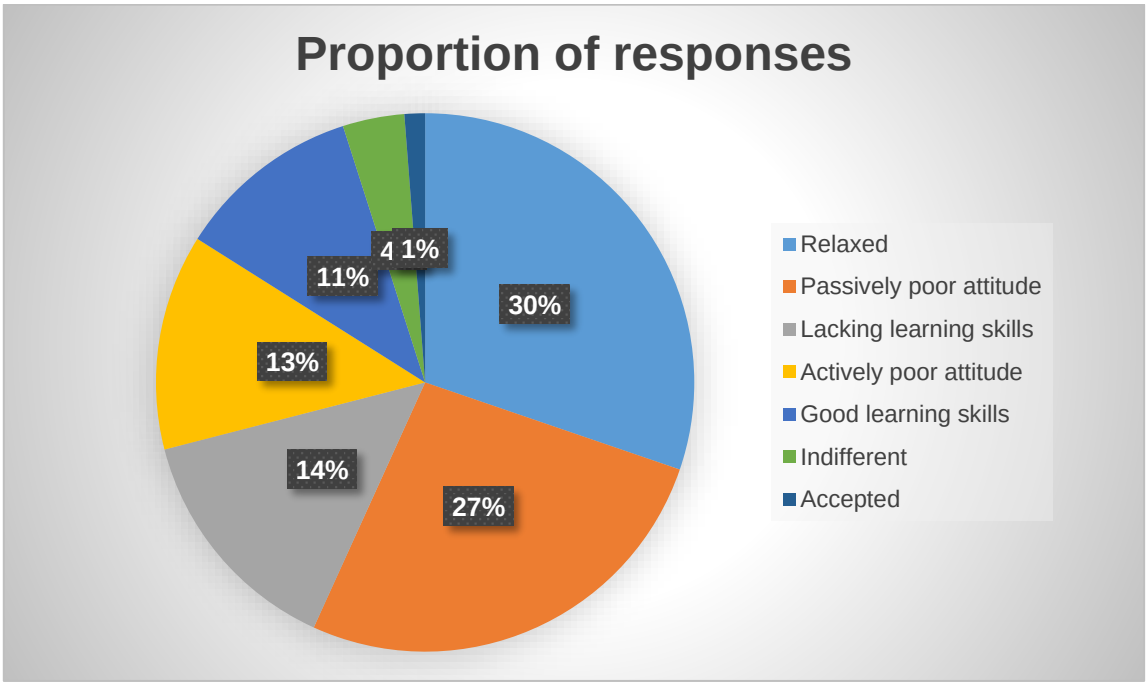


Figure 23. Diversity of 'non-*perfectionist'* constructs.

This highlights in more detail a sense of someone who is not a *perfectionist* as being more relaxed and having a poor attitude towards their learning. There was a split in beliefs between non-*perfectionists* either lacking or having good learning skills, which shows a real difference between participants' constructs of what a *perfectionist* might be.

Where discussion touched upon the constructs of success or happiness, participants were asked whether combinations of these were possible with *perfectionism* and non-*perfectionism*. The charts below show the results of these discussions.

Figure 24. Participant beliefs regarding *perfectionism* and success.

Figure 24 shows that there was a clear preference for the belief that *perfectionists* are successful, and that 'non-*perfectionists'* are less successful. There was also somewhat of a belief that *perfectionists* are less likely to be unsuccessful than 'non-*perfectionists'*. This reflects a construct of *perfectionism* as relating to success.

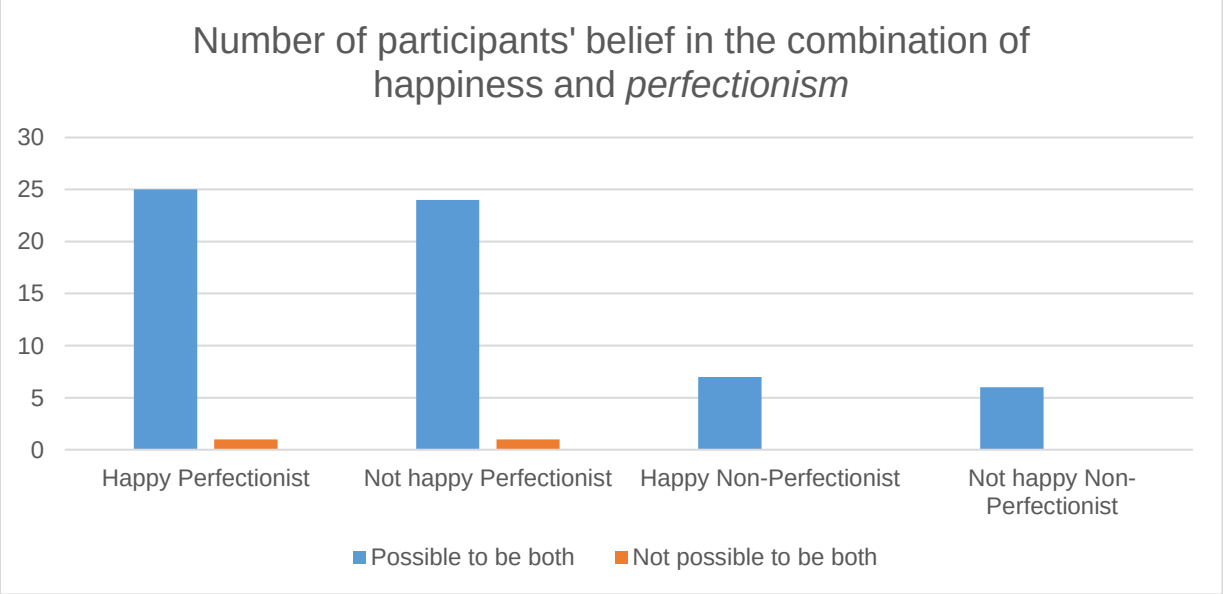


Figure 25. Participant beliefs regarding *perfectionism* and happiness.

Figure 25 shows that participants largely believed that is was possible for *perfectionists* to be both happy and not happy, and the same with 'non-*perfectionists'*, indicating that happiness is less related to the construct of *perfectionism* than success for the participants in the study. However, there is an element of conflict here, in that 'contentment' arose as a theme for 'non-*perfectionists'* in around a fifth of participants, but not at all for *perfectionists*.

1b. How does perfectionism arise?

Very few participants believed that *perfectionism* is something people are born with; many believed it arises from environmental factors. Around half of participants acknowledged that it may be an interaction between the two, as reflected in the literature, and a couple acknowledged they didn't know. There was no distinction between students, parents and staff in their beliefs about the origin of *perfectionism*.

Interestingly, some participants compared *perfectionism* to a mental illness:

> I think it develops…er…as any mental illness…it's the sort of mental health…it doesn't grow from anywhere I think it just develops in, with their mental health like any other mental health issue. I think it can affect anybody (Julia, T)
>
> Er if it's OCD I think they're born with it. It's, so like any mental health problem. You could develop it from certain things that happen in your life say a problem happens and you now need to do everything perfect (Isabelle, Y10).

Nurture factors included the effects of family (parents and siblings), friends, schooling, illness, society as a whole and the government, with parental pressure being the dominant discourse.

There was a distinction between the girls' local authority grammar participants and the participants from the boys' independent grammar and comprehensives in their beliefs about school type having an impact; with the former believing it could and the latter two feeling it was irrelevant. This may be of interest in future explorations of the relationship between school type and *perfectionism*.

Some of the teachers alluded to factors which may make *perfectionism* worse;

> I think the modern world is a very stressful place to be if you're of a certain predisposition. And I think schools could do more to address mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression (James, T)
>
> Er (sigh)...do you know, I think the media has quite an important role to play, I think the government has an important role to play, the league tables. Add a lot of pressure. Erm...and you know for as long as we are sort of puppets of the government. And constantly striving for new targets. We're going to be passing on kind of pressure to our children. And you know I think that's quite unfair really. To be more child-centred it needs to start from down at the bottom rather than from starting with the people who don't really know what they're talking about most of the time! (Marie, T)
>
> We have exam stress groups and again I don't think the language is helpful because I think everyone stresses about exams. I don't, I've never met anyone who's like "exams! Yes!" (laughs). In the same way as a teacher I stress about observations and stuff. And I worry that sometimes we use language that creates a monster. To say it creates an excuse is perhaps, makes it sound like our students look for an opt out but it…By saying "come along to this exam stress group because you suffer from exam stress". Makes it, it almost creates something that, everyone else is actually feeling it's just how it's dealt with. It's different
>
> (researcher) *Yes, there's naming it isn't there*
>
> Yes, yeah that's it
>
> (researcher) *But then there's dwelling on it, and perpetuating it*
>
> And I feel sometimes we need to move away from that. And not, maybe talk about resilience rather than exam stress (Michelle, T).

Exams were discussed as the most stressful thing in Year 9 and 10's lives, along with homework and not doing well generally with schoolwork. Friendship issues and peer pressure were also mentioned, a sense of not fitting in along with feeling restricted from independent activities. Aspects that make such stress worse included extra pressures from adults, and even from the school system as a whole:

> And doing well particularly, this school is a high-achieving school erm and that is the, you know, not only does she want to be happy with her GCSE's but the fact that that's what the school expects as well (Sandra^, P).

Only one participant mentioned the potential stress of social media (Julia, T), surprising considering the increasing amount of press coverage this is receiving over the potentially harmful effects it can have on young people's wellbeing (e.g. Udorie, 2015). One student, self-identifying as a *perfectionist*, highlighted the following as making a stressful situation worse:

> if you didn't have support or if you didn't have support from family or friends and you felt like it was all getting piled on and there was no way out (Grace^, Y10).

The mention of the sense of "no way out" is closely linked with depressive thoughts of hopelessness and is of concern when raised by someone self-identifying as high in *perfectionism*. A conflict was noted for some participants who appeared to offer contrasting views within the same dialogue, representing a lack of clarity in their understanding of the construct.

The origin of 'not *perfectionist'* was brought up by ten participants, half of which considered a mixture of nature and nurture, with two believing it is entirely nurture and four nature. Despite the small numbers, this may be of significance since participants attributed 'non-*perfectionism*' to nature more than they did *perfectionism*. This perhaps reflects the idea for some that *perfectionism* is a learned response to the environment, but that being a 'non-*perfectionist'* might be something one is born as; this may therefore present a challenge to *perfectionists* in becoming 'non-*perfectionists'* as the characteristics attributed by some to 'non-*perfectionists*' are perceived to be fixed and in-built, rather than learnable by others. This represented a conflict amongst some participants that although *perfectionism* was a learned response through nurture, it was not possible, within their construct of 'non-

perfectionist', for them to change. This perhaps would result in an attitude towards *perfectionist* students as sympathy and resignation; they, through no fault of their own, became the way they are through external pressures (sympathy), but they can never become 'non-*perfectionist'* as you either are or you are not (resignation). This could result in a sense of not feeling accepted, yet also hopelessness that they can change, presenting perhaps a threat to identity and therefore emotional wellbeing.

1c. what risks and benefits are associated with *perfectionism*?

As predicted, there was little awareness of the potentially harmful outcomes that have been linked with *perfectionism*, such as serious mental health conditions and suicide.

The risks of perfectionism

Many participants struggled to think of examples of times when it wouldn't be helpful to be precise and accurate, the most common idea being in creative activities, and a couple of participants couldn't identify any negative outcomes of being a *perfectionist*. The majority of risks identified were relatively minor, such as they would be annoying to others (Harry, Y10) and may miss out on leisure time (Cato, Y10), becoming perhaps isolated (Victoria, Jane^, P) and antisocial (Matt, Y9), or that they would get frustrated or upset (Dave^, P). Stress was a common theme, although lacked elaboration of its extent:

> They'll be tired! It's really stressful! (Michelle, T)
>
> they just find their general environment quite stressful, quite a lot of the time (Delta, T)
>
> when they're older you can't like, jobs and things you, stuff that you can't get perfect, you just get stressed (Brad, Y9)

> there are dangers inherent in being a *perfectionist* (James, T)
>
> Maybe they could end up being unhappy? (Joanne, P)
>
> if you're too perfect and you can't let it go it's gona hold you back because you're not gona be able to move on from it to then carry on with something else (Nadia^, Y10).

The parent who self-defined as high in *perfectionism*, along with his daughter, described in more detail the issue of stress when living with high *perfectionist* thoughts:

> if she doesn't feel she's fulfilling her potential then she gets very frustrated and I do too…if things don't go right… to me it's, it's almost like a failure…Oh I get quite, I wouldn't say it, it seems bad temperedness but it's frustration, I'd say my bad temperedness is more frustration, when things don't go right it puts me out and then I'm really disappointed! And then I get, I actually get down in the dumps (Joel^, P).

A small number of participants hinted at perhaps more harmful outcomes:

> if they were not particularly happy with how they were and they were still constantly striving, like a compulsion to do better it will just eat at them and they will turn into a…wreck (Charlie, Y10)
>
> Exhausted…burnout (Jane^, P).

The spiral of *perfectionism* was described by one participant:

> They could constantly be frustrated which will constantly make them feel bad and in the end they could just not be able to sleep at night because they'll keep worrying about it so they won't, they'll be like really tired and everything so that'll make everything be knocked down which'll, if they're then not achieving as much as they used to be that'll make them want to be even more perfect so that'll keep going down (Emily, Y10).

Depression was mentioned as a possible risk (Isabelle, Y10), along with eating disorders (Claire, T, Dave^, P) and OCD (Maddy^, Y9, Isabelle, Lizzie^, Y10), but suicide was referred to by just two participants (Claire, Dave^). It was notable that one of these participants mentioned suicide in an off-hand way, laughing as it was said and apologising, indicating perhaps a low level of awareness of the major risks associated with *perfectionism* and perhaps a stigma associated with the most severe outcomes. It is interesting to note that the major risks identified were done so by participants linked to the girls' local authority grammar school and only one comprehensive school participant; no mental health problems were clearly identified

by the participants linked with the boys' independent grammar school. This is a concern since the literature suggests males may be at particular risk of suicide.

A related risk identified by only one participant is the lack of awareness of the *perfectionist* to their own behaviours:

> many of the anorexics we have will not admit and are unaware and are miserable but are terribly *perfectionist* (Claire, T).

Along with a reluctance to seek help, not explicitly mentioned by any participant, this lack of self-awareness may present a risk to the wellbeing of *perfectionist* students. There was also a belief amongst the participants that other students would either not like *perfectionist* students, or would ignore them;

> they're kind of invisible (Victoria, P);
>
> I think most of them wouldn't notice (Sally^, P).

Themes discussed include jealousy, thinking the *perfectionist* is strange or odd, annoyance, sabotage, bullying, and reinforcing the construct of the *perfectionist* as a high-achiever:

> maybe a little bit of a "nobody likes a smart Alek" kind of thing (Joanne, P)

The dominant theme was that other students would find them annoying as a result of jealousy; the words "swot" and "geek" were used by a number of participants.

One participant recognised that teachers may unintentionally ignore such students:

> I think they would really want to see them push on but they might also go under the radar because of what's going on there too (Debbie^, P)

The benefits of perfectionism

Using a cognitive-behavioural framework the benefits were analysed as either being the gain of desirable outcomes or the avoidance of undesirable outcomes. Both had an equal split across participant comments. Gaining desirable outcomes perhaps fits with the notion of an 'adaptive *perfectionist'*. Participants could discuss benefits of being precise and accurate, such as getting certain desirable jobs and generally producing results, linked also to having high standards and expectations, for example:

> Because it matters. Quite a lot of the time. (Emma^, P)
>
> Because that's what, that's what the real world demands erm in work, in your exams, in life that's, that's what you know that, that's, that's what life is (Sandra^, P).

A number of participants felt the *perfectionists* were likely to go far in life and do well, and that *perfectionism* was what would help them get there, with one parent (Dave^) describing it as "key". Success was a clear theme amongst the students, relating to *perfectionism*:

> obviously like the very high paid jobs like being a lawyer or something like that could be open to you because you get everything right (Harry, Y10)
>
> They will go on to do well and be successful (Jack, Y9)
>
> the future might be nice life, nice family, money (Matt, Y9)
>
> you'll possibly more focused and therefore you're more likely to get high grades and things and go into better education sources and get a better job (Isabelle, Y10)
>
> They're gona get on with life and they're gona do well I think (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> they will achieve and they will go far in life and like get what they want (Grace^, Y10)

A teacher was able to identify a different dimension of success relating to *perfectionism* and interaction with others;

> I think if, if someone like this becomes a team leader, erm…and is a *perfectionist* about being a team leader I think it can be quite positive 'cause I think they can start to think about different personalities, and can get more out of people because they have got high standards and high expectations (Marie, T)

There was hence a powerful belief that *perfectionism* leads to positive outcomes,

predominantly success. Happiness was not a strong theme amongst these outcomes, mentioned only by a small number of participants, all parents;

> they might end up, erm, just achieving the best that they can achieve and just be happy with it (Joanne, P)
>
> if they were getting the results at work and they were succeeding and you know some people's happiness is different to other people's happiness and if that's what makes them happy having a neat and tidy house then, and you know all the results at work and perhaps the bonus coming in then fine (Victoria, P)
>
> you get there and it falls in place and you're happy (Jane^, P).

There was a general perception among participants, including teachers, that teachers would like *perfectionists*, with comments such as:

> they would be his favourite students because while everyone else is…not doing his work them two would probably go on to do the best out of all of them (Harry, Y10)
>
> I think he'd probably like the quiet hard working one, because he can just get on with his work while he's trying to sort out everything else that's going on in the background (Joanne, P)
>
> they'll probably be really glad they've got a student who really cares about the subject they're teaching (Brad, Y9)
>
> I think the teacher would be quite happy with them (Lizzie^, Y10)
>
> I think the teacher would like them because they actually want to do well and seem interested in the subject that they're teaching (Charlotte, Y10)
>
> They like them, don't they? (Nadia^, Y10)
>
> a teacher will be encouraged when they see students like that (Joel^, P)

This perhaps adds weight to the suggestion that *perfectionism* may be unintentionally reinforced in schools. One teacher noted the conflict some teachers may experience:

> As a teacher there's one of two things, you either think "ah brilliant, I've got somebody on my side", or "this person is picking out every single little fault" (laughs). So it could go one of two ways. (Michelle, T)

Avoiding undesirable outcomes perhaps fits more with the notion of a 'maladaptive *perfectionist'*. When discussing making mistakes there was a sense that lack of precision and accuracy in life in general could result in problems such as miscommunication, reduced motivation and failure, or even dangerous outcomes:

> you'd cost someone's life maybe in the most extreme case! (Harry, Y10)
>
> a small thing can affect…things down the line quick, like hugely (Matt, Y9)
>
> If you're not precise and accurate then it can go all wrong (Charlotte, Y10)
>
> you could give somebody mixed information or the wrong information and they would do something wrong (Isabelle, Y10)
>
> people aren't really going to be happy with you (Nadia^, Y10)
>
> you could be deemed as unreliable (Sandra^, P)
>
> Critical, life critical (Dave^, P)
>
> It's important if you look the really far way if you look towards a profession it's important to be precise and accurate because you can't afford making mistakes…listening to myself it sounds very scary and very black and white but, I know there is a place for making mistakes and there is always a grey zone but in the end if you push it to the extreme, mistakes have a knock-on effect and the idea something will suffer for it! (Jane^, P)
>
> if people are relying on you, it might not be a matter of life and death but there's a lot of reliability (Sally^, P).

Some responses were more 'catastrophising' than others, indicating perhaps avoidance of mistakes as a powerful motivator for *perfectionism* when thinking in these terms.

One student mentioned what others might think of 'non-*perfectionists'*, suggesting the teacher would likely be annoyed with such students as they may not pay attention, and that other students might perceive them to be *"a bit of a rebel"* (Brad) and even admire them. One parent suggested that 'non-*perfectionists*' are the students we would want to change rather than the *perfectionists* (Debbie^). Perhaps a motivator for remaining a *perfectionist* is the avoidance of this perceived polar opposite.

1d. what are their thoughts on the changeability of *perfectionism*?

A number of themes emerged during these discussions and will be summarised in the following order**:**

a. Changeability of perfectionism

b. How to change perfectionism

c. Should perfectionists change?

d. Barriers to change

e. Own desire to change

a. Changeability of perfectionism

Participants mainly felt confident that *perfectionism* could change, though were divided over whether they considered it to be easy or hard to change, and struggled to think of ideas that could help, despite providing lots of suggestions of ways to support students who are stressed or who may not feel proud of themselves. This perhaps suggests participants' constructs of *perfectionists* were somewhat removed from their constructs of the average student who may feel stressed or lack a sense of pride. There was also a sense that it would be easier for someone who isn't a *perfectionist* to become one than it would be for someone who is a *perfectionist* to let go of their *perfectionism*:

> I think if you're not a *perfectionist* I think it's easier to pick up those kinds of habits and traits, whereas if you are it's a lot harder to let them go and become not bothered by it. Because if you're so perfect you can't let it go and be wrong (Nadia^, Y10).

One participant insightfully noted that it may depend how much of a *perfectionist* you are that determines how easy or difficult it is to change:

> It depends on how much of a *perfectionist* they are. So if they are extremely focused and they will get very upset if something is out of line it would take a lot of work to get them back down. But if you're not a *perfectionist* it also depends on how not a *perfectionist* you are because you could be brought up due to something happening in your life (Isabelle, Y10).

Others asserted how difficult it would be to promote lasting change:

> I'm actually quite interested in how you can actually do that because some of the aspects of changing your behaviour are extraordinarily difficult (Dave^, P)

> just thinking about my experience, whenever I've been given a great big folder of like self-help stuff, or read a book, it kind of stays with me for, I don't know, a few weeks. But you steadily drift back into your old *perfectionist* ways (James, T).

Discussions around changeability exposed conflicts, for example one participant concluded that *perfectionism* is a fixed trait after discussing her thoughts:

> I think that you eventually learn to let things slide. Erm…I think that you, you begin to realise that, you know, the things that you can and can't control I guess. I don't think it's easy. I think maybe you learn to mask it better (laughs) (Michelle, T).

Others also expressed the conflict that *perfectionism* is both a part of who some people are, yet able to change, for example:

> …I think it's very hard for a *perfectionist* to move away from that. But sometimes for their own sanity they have to. Erm...but I do think it's possible for people to become, more sort of…er……motivated but I don't think they would ever become what I'd call a *perfectionist*. You either are or you're not (James, T).

Such conflict reminded me of one of the 'dialectics' in dialectical behaviour therapy; the need to balance acceptance with change to both validate who the person is, while acknowledging that it will be beneficial for them to move away from that. This gives rise to the notion that *perfectionism* is more closely related to a personality-based issue than merely cognitive.

b. How to change perfectionism

A number of people admitted they couldn't think of anything that could help a *perfectionist* be less of a *perfectionist*, stating that it was difficult to think of anything

when they themselves aren't *perfectionists* nor do they know any personally. This perhaps hints that the insights for help are likely to come from *perfectionists* themselves or those close to them who perhaps have a better understanding of the issue, supporting the critical emancipatory approach of the study. The majority of participants however made suggestions of things that might help; there was an even split between ideas for self-help and ideas for others to help the individual.

The majority of suggestions for self-help were things the individual could have some control over, such as doing more of the things they don't like doing, realisation and acceptance that things will be fine if they make a mistake and distinguishing between what is and isn't under their control, preparing oneself for change, learning relaxation techniques or coping mechanisms and noticing the time they would have for enjoyable things if they spent less time on work. A number of participants stated the *perfectionist* should learn to "*let go*" a little bit (e.g. Jane^, P) or "*go with the flow*" (e.g. Sally^, P), and learn not to worry or overanalyse (e.g. Amy^, Y9) though struggled to think of steps towards these things, suggesting a gap in knowledge for helping such individuals.

Of concern there was a handful of participants for whom there was a sense that the only way for some people to let go of *perfectionist* thinking would be if something drastic happened in their lives to severely alter the way they viewed the world, such as a major failure or accident, or something else outside their control such as others doing much better than them. This represents a fairly hopeless view of *perfectionist* students as being proactively able to change.

> …it might get too much and…er…I think that's the only way it would go to not *perfectionist* if it all gets too much (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> because as a *perfectionist* like in a school you might be the best and like might be studying the best but going onto college there might be people who are better and smarter than you so you could become jealous of them doing better in their test results and working harder than you and you might go on to be jealous and then lose temper (Jack, Y9)
>
> there would be an event in their life that would break their determination or their sense of achievement and they would think "oh everything's awful anyway, I can't, or maybe I'm bodily injured I can't go for a profession I wanted, maybe I can't do anything at all", if something is broken in them I guess they could swallow it down (Jane^, P)
>
> Illness?…Supposing you developed a brain injury I dunno, erm it may change the way you think. I dunno a major event something like a marriage or death or children I think can all change your focus sometimes…a major event like parents' separation and things like that (Debbie^, P).

Regarding earlier, proactive intervention, there was a theme of helping *perfectionists* learn to cope with both mistakes and change. Relaxation techniques were another suggestion, along with more general mental health support in schools (James, T). One participant mentioned the need for governmental changes to address the impact of the pressures facing young people, and another talked about the pressures of the school day being eased if the contact hours were increased. There was a sense amongst participants that *perfectionists* had to 'accept' that things can't always be perfect, though an acknowledgement that this would be challenging for a *perfectionist* to assimilate.

One teacher (Claire) had utilised an effective method to support a student high in *perfectionism* of setting a target to make a mistake. Another (Julia) had made special arrangements to support a student whose *perfectionism* prevented her writing during lessons. The majority of suggestions were ideas that could be utilised by staff and families, with a small portion of participants referring to the need for outside help:

> I think that could be possibly even like therapy sort of, seeing a psychologist if it was that bad (Lizzie^, Y10)

> They need to talk to someone that knows what they're talking about! (Nadia^, Y10)
>
> and actually this is where transactional analysis works as well to understand, getting a *perfectionist* to understand themselves and then to understand how other people are and then how interaction happens between all the different personality types (Dave^, P).

However, all participants felt the provision of guidance from a psychology perspective to schools and families would be beneficial, with one staff member stating:

> Brilliant yeah, because it's always just said "oh its OCD traits". Where actually well how do we work with that student? We can put into place what we know as a school, but actually working with that student how can we support them to…as you go into adulthood and you go into the workplace you can't be meticulously checking every single word; it'd be brilliant to have something to sort of work through, age-appropriate that we can actually sit with the student and resources (Julia, T).

Stress intervention was discussed as a separate issue from *perfectionism*, although many participants brought up the construct of "stressed" in their *perfectionism* discussions. It was concerning that a large majority of participants struggled to name specific helpful strategies for managing frustration and stress, and one even came up with taking it out on others through name-calling as the only thing that came to mind. Among those strategies discussed included having breaks from work and relaxing with friends or TV, and seeking out someone older to talk with. Through observation and discussion of the initial activity it was evident that many participants utilised coping strategies outside their awareness to manage pressure, such as distraction through activity, and positive self-talk such as minimisation of the task importance, encouragement and reassurance. Only a small handful were able to reflect on these processes, suggesting a place for stress awareness and management teaching amongst young people and perhaps even the adults around them so that effective coping strategies are modelled and encouraged.

There was also some discussion around increasing students' sense of pride in themselves; praise and acknowledgement were the strongest themes. All participants felt it was important to feel proud of oneself, for such aspects as motivation and self-esteem, although a number discussed the more negative features of pride such as arrogance. It was also interesting to note very few participants expressed any pride in their performance on the activity, and could think of a variety of things which might stop someone feeling proud of themselves. There was little link between these discussions and the ideas for helping a *perfectionist*, suggesting the aspect of lacking pride in oneself is a missing construct of *perfectionism* for many people.

c. Should perfectionists change?

There was an interesting theme which emerged amongst a fifth of participants, suggesting a sort of pride in *perfectionism*. They felt that *perfectionists* should not change and instead should be reassured that it is ok to be a *perfectionist*, and have the positive aspects of *perfectionism* discussed with them. This suggests that *perfectionism*, for some, is viewed as a positive thing, or perhaps done so as a protective defence mechanism when self-identifying as a *perfectionist*:

> No, because as we said at the start if, there are some jobs that require you to be *perfectionists* and if that person wants to be a doctor they have to stay like that (Harry, Y10)
>
> a *perfectionist* shouldn't change because like if it's helping you in life you shouldn't change, like you shouldn't change for anyone really like maybe if you're not successful don't change who you are just change something you're doing like if you're messing around in lessons maybe pay more attention and that would help but like if you're a *perfectionist* and doing really well you shouldn't really change (Harriet^, Y9)
>
> I don't think so! (laughs) I think that erm you know, I…I don't know…I don't think there's anything wrong with being a *perfectionist*! I think it's important there are people who do feel that way (laughs) because there are people who don't care enough about stuff (Michelle, T)
>
> obviously *perfectionist* is overdoing things and we can't approve of that can we? (laughs) But I can feel for a *perfectionist* in some ways, I think why not strive for good things, why not be

> perfect, if you can be obviously if it is taking a toll, if it's too much if you can't be, it's silly you should stay happy and healthy with it…but if you respect the limit, why not try to be perfect? (Jane^, P).

A small minority of self-identifying *perfectionists* suggested that *perfectionists* should not change, but rather be supported to manage their 'symptoms':

> I think you shouldn't change it, like it's not something you can sort of change, just get help with maybe. I think you're your own person and you're your own person for a reason, you're someone kind of, if you're a *perfectionist* you're different to everybody else, you erm, you shouldn't, I don't think you should kind of feel you should be judged by, for because you're a *perfectionist*, you just like stuff doing to a certain standard and there's nothing really wrong with that but I think people need to kind of understand that and like help where they can and then sometimes maybe professional help maybe needed but you've just got to have that hope that there can be some people that would be able to help as well you've just got to find that help and the right people (Jessica, Y10).

This has a similar feel to the sense of pride in communities such as those diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome whereby the condition is considered part of the person, with acknowledgement that support strategies are also needed. This would suggest the belief that *perfectionism* is something that is an inescapable part of the personality to be supported rather than changed.

One self-identifying *perfectionist* expressed the following conflict:

> You know if they like to be that way if they like to be *perfectionist*, if it's not causing them any stress, or any worries or if they're absolutely fine doing that then that's absolutely fine. On the other hand if striving for this perfection that is realistically never going to happen, if that is damaging you then yeah it would probably be better if you…I'm not saying, I'm not saying that it'd be easy to change or that they could change but in an ideal world they'd change (Amy^, Y9).

This was echoed by a member of staff:

> …It depends on how it's affecting their lives. If it is having such an effect on their lives that it is preventing them from a) being happy and moving forwards then yes things need to change but if it's…and it depends on what they feel around their *perfectionism*, if they…if it's not having a massive effect on their lives sometimes to be a *perfectionist* I feel that actually it is a…a good trait. That…we….it's good to have a…a…aspirations really that actually that you have a goal that you have a sight that yeah I want to achieve…but obviously if it has detrimental effects to the wider…and prevents you doing things. But…it's…It's a really tricky one to answer! (Julia, T).

A couple of participants felt *perfectionists* should not change if it was not having a negative impact on them, reflecting perhaps the notion of an 'adaptive *perfectionist*':

> …I guess it depends…if somebody's like that and they're happy and they can still do what they want to do and do well then I think it's fine for them to be *perfectionist* (Charlotte, Y10)
>
> Not necessarily! If it's not impacting them negatively then there's no problem (Nadia^, Y10).

The large majority of participants said it depends on whether the person is unhappy or not as to whether they should change, or the effect they are having on others:

> It depends if it's affecting them and their happiness and their health I think (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> Er…it depends how extreme it is really, if it's so extreme then I don't think that's healthy really, to be like obsessing over something (Lizzie^, Y10)
>
> It kind of depends if they change for the better or for the worst, if they change for the worst then maybe should've stayed the same because now they've kind of gone downhill a bit but if they change for the better like it's a good thing so they're doing better cos like a *perfectionist* that could be like holding them back (Harriet^, Y9)
>
> I don't know, er maybe, there's like, advantages of both of them, neither of them are necessarily bad, unless it gets to an unhealthy stage. Like if you're pathological *perfectionist*, if that even exists! (Cato, Y10)
>
> It depends how it makes them feel if they're fine with being that way and although there are times when they are really frustrated and panicked by something they might still be fine, it might not make them really upset because they'll be kind of, everyone else will be having certain things that make them feel that way so it's just a normal kind of thing to go along but it. Yeah but if it's making them, if they're like constantly on edge about something or frustrated about something like all day then it might really mean somewhere they might need to let a bit of edge in to be told by someone that they are doing fine just to stick it down a bit (Emily, Y10)
>
> Um not necessarily, um, if it's what they're like it's what they're like, if they're harming other people maybe they should (Sage^, Y10).

There was a strong sense within this that the choice for change had to come from within the person:

> you can't force someone to change they can only change themselves (Sage^, Y10)
>
> Well if they want to be changed, if they want to stop being perfect all the time, and they're…it's kind of like taking someone off drugs. So say if someone was taking a lot of erm, drugs and erm they wanted to go to rehab and get off of it it's kind of the same thing (Isabelle, Y10)
>
> They could change, but would they want to? It's whether they acknowledge they're *perfectionist*, if they do and they're happy with that and it works for them why would they want to change, but if it's not working for them (Dave^, P)
>
> I don't think you should change for anybody else because it's like you're your own person so if you're happy with that I wouldn't change but if you're not then maybe change, do it for yourself really (Grace^, Y10).

Around a third of participants felt *perfectionists* definitely should change to lower the pressures on themselves, reflecting the notion of *perfectionism* as always being a negative thing.

> Yeah cos I think they're putting undue pressure on themselves (Marie, T).

Within these discussions, there was a clear theme of balance and the notion of a person not going completely to the other side ('not-*perfectionist*').

> I think it, people shouldn't be that, should be an absolute *perfectionist*, it's good to have the motivation to get it right but when you don't you shouldn't get too annoyed or stressed about it (Brad, Y9)
>
> I think there should like a balance in the middle between a *perfectionist* and a 'not *perfectionist'* you don't, like I said before if you're a *perfectionist* you don't want to slip backwards and become a 'non-*perfectionist'*, there should be that kind of balance where you're easing the pressure and you've not got, you've got that little pressure for motivation and things (Jessica, Y10).

d. Barriers to change

One student reflected:

> it's quite a difficult transition to make I think (Maddy^, Y9)

struggling to elaborate the reasons for that, stating simply:

> their attitude to everything might go down.

A teacher echoed this assertion with lack of explanation:

> I think it's very hard for a *perfectionist* to move away from that. But sometimes for their own sanity they have to (James, T).

A couple of participants alluded to possible barriers to change facing *perfectionists*, based on them enjoying getting things right and having things a certain way, and it seeming like a "*very slippery slope*" (Sally^, P) if they begin to become less *perfectionist*.

> …I think they're difficult traits to… let go of…if you've got those. If you like getting things right and you have that attention to detail…it, it wouldn't sit well, I know I like things in a certain way, I couldn't just not do that because its ingrained in you, it's, it's part of how you are and your personality unless you go completely off the rails, if you, if you thrive off getting things right, it makes you happy. Yeah. It wouldn't make you happy if you started getting things wrong (Emma^, P).

This participant went on to say:

> I think they would lose their way! Or they would have lost their way not to be like that.

Supported by other participant views:

> They might become less motivated in what they do (Joanne, P)
>
> They could get stressed and upset (Isabelle, Y10)
>
> if you're so perfect you can't let it go and be wrong (Nadia^, Y10)

and one student referred to becoming less *perfectionist* as "*going downhill*" (Jessica, Y10).

One participant reflected that having to adapt to a new way of being could feel too much of a challenge for a *perfectionist*:

> if they were fine with how they were and they were handling it and then they changed, it would be kind of a whole new thing so learning to deal then with how that is (Emily, Y10).

Many of these thoughts reflect an 'all or nothing' cognitive error, whereby small steps of change are inaccessible to the participants' consciousness and the fear of becoming the attributes associated with 'not *perfectionist'* is a powerful driver to remain a *perfectionist*. A significant moment in the discussions with two students opened their awareness to the possibility of small steps of change, with both reflecting the benefit of seeing things in a new light and later in the interview acknowledging the potential for movement:

> I think there should like a balance in the middle between a *perfectionist* and a 'not *perfectionist'*, you don't…if you're a *perfectionist* you don't want to slip backwards and become a 'non-*perfectionist'* there should be that kind of balance where you're easing the pressure and you've not got, you've got that little pressure for motivation and things (Jessica, Y10)
>
> you might not be completely *perfectionist* but like if you move down towards like the normal percentage of each I feel like there is, like in between there should be something like, like you've got *perfectionist*, 'not *perfectionist'*, then you've got just normal so go, not go with the flow, but just like you know… (Grace^, Y10).

Another potential cognitive error which may be maintaining *perfectionism*, as

observed during the interviews, may be the close association of success with *perfectionism*, perhaps reflecting an 'attribution error'. Many participants believed *perfectionists* were more likely to be successful people, and their constructs for success were largely positive, desirable characteristics. This suggests that a possible area for intervention could be helping reconstruct people's understanding of both success and *perfectionism*, so the two are not necessarily so entwined, by perhaps elucidating the characteristics of a healthy high-achiever, a conscientious student or an 'optimalist'. Another means of intervention, begun somewhat during interviews, was in the discussion of happiness constructs with participants and their beliefs about the happiness of *perfectionists*. This relationship was more negative than with success, revealing areas of conflict for many participants and provoking real thought regarding their beliefs around *perfectionism*, for example:

> …(laughs) so being a *perfectionist* is not necessarily a good thing is it, looking, when I look at that? (Debbie^, P).

Another interesting theme that emerged was in the description of *perfectionism* as being like an addiction:

> It's almost like an addiction, it's like a drug that you can't leave off, I would say it's like a drug (Joel^, P)
> It's kind of like taking someone off drugs (Isabelle, Y10).

Considered in this way, it may be clearer why *perfectionism* is difficult to change, yet also suggests a route for intervention:

> it's like Alcoholics Anonymous, you have to do your 12 steps I think for a *perfectionist*! (Claire, T).

e. Own desire to change

All students were asked to rate themselves and their ideal self on the *perfectionist-'*not *perfectionist'* bipolar scale. Some students struggled to answer, stating for example:

> (laughs)…I don't know because I want to do well and learn but not necessarily be the best, I'm happy with just doing well myself
>
> Researcher: *Yes so you've picked up on some of the things that you've got over here*
>
> Yeah
>
> Researcher: *But also some of the things here so would it be fair to say you'd be somewhere in the middle of that scale?*
>
> Yeah probably (Charlotte, Y10).

Around a third of the students who answered (5/14) felt they were already at their 'ideal' level of *perfectionism*. Around a fifth (3/14) wanted to be less *perfectionist*, and almost half (6/14) of participants wanted to be more *perfectionist*, highlighting a strong positive construct amongst these participants for *perfectionism*. The results of this can be seen graphically below. What this also highlights is perhaps a misconception about the risks and benefits of *perfectionism* in these individuals' value systems when compared with the research literature, or perhaps a powerful reinforcement of *perfectionism* in their environments, despite acknowledging a balance of risks and benefits.

Figure 26. Desire to change amongst students based on existing constructs.

This perhaps indicates that *perfectionism* is perceived as a largely positive trait amongst the students participating in the study. This belief is likely to have arisen from a combination of individual factors and environmental reinforcement. It highlights the difficulty with promoting change as it demonstrates that motivation to change is likely to be low if the specific concept of *perfectionism* is the focus, as these participants perceive this word to represent positive outcomes and therefore their motivation to change this is likely to be low. Hence the focus of the work is more clearly around the understanding of the term and the recognition of specific thoughts, feelings and behaviours relating to needs and difficulties.

2. What contradictions and potential issues in participant beliefs emerge?

The identified contradictions and potential issues in participant beliefs relating to the research question are summarised in the table below, using relevant literature to support.

Table 18

Contradictions and potential issues in participant beliefs

Sub-question	Contradiction or potential issue in participant beliefs	Current knowledge and understanding in the research field	Support from the research literature
2a. what are the contradictions and potential issues in participant beliefs about what *perfectionism* looks like?	There is an obvious stereotype of a *perfectionist*; this is a 'model' student who works hard even if others aren't, and is controlled.	There exists no universal definition of a *perfectionist*, therefore no two *perfectionists* are entirely alike; all *perfectionists* are unique individuals. It may not be obvious who is a *perfectionist*; they may go unnoticed as thoughts and feelings may not result in recognisable behaviours. It may be that those students who are the opposite of 'model' have *perfectionist* beliefs which affect their behaviour equally.	*Kearns, Forbes and Gardiner, 2007.* *Damian et al., 2014.* *Flett and Hewitt, 2014.*
	Perfectionist students are successful and high-achieving.	*Perfectionism* is multidimensional and may be evident in any or all areas of a person's life, not just academically. *Perfectionists* may under-achieve as a direct result of their *perfectionism*. Although *perfectionism* has been linked with positive life outcomes, it has a much stronger link with negative life outcomes. Students without *perfectionist* beliefs are also capable of being successful and achieving highly.	*Hewitt and Flett, 1991.* *Shaunessy, 2011.* *Haring, Hewitt and Flett, 2003.* *Dweck, 2006.*

		Perfectionism isn't about actually being perfect, but about continually seeking perfection.	*Shafran, Egan and Wade, 2010.*
	Perfectionist students are confident and happy when they achieve. They are proud of themselves and may be boastful.	*Perfectionists* are likely to lack confidence despite perhaps appearing outwardly confident. Their pattern of cognitions makes it likely that they will find fault even with achievement and they will continue to feel anxious. A sense of relief is more likely than a sense of confidence and happiness, as achievement is likely to be attempting to fulfil an emotional/relational need.	*Roxborough et al., 2012.* *Pembroke, 2012.*
	Perfectionist students are stressed and worried about not achieving; they don't like making mistakes, just because they like things to be 'right'.	Many aspects of school and life may present challenge to *perfectionists*, depending on their areas of value, not just academics. It is likely that 'not achieving' is not the underlying anxiety, but rather the lack of a sense of acceptance and belonging and therefore healthy self-esteem.	*Gilman and Ashby, 2003.* *Sherry et al., 2008.*
	Perfectionism, whether something one is born with or learned, is a personality trait	It is likely that *perfectionism* fulfils an emotional/relational need and therefore serves an important function. It may even develop as an avoidance-oriented coping mechanism following early trauma.	*Neumeister and Finch, 2006.* *Gnilka, Ashby and Noble, 2012.*

	and fulfils no real function.		
	Although *perfectionism* may arise through a combination of factors, it is largely just how some people are.	*Perfectionism* is likely to arise from a combination of factors; it is also likely to be *maintained* by a combination of factors. Peoples' personality develops within their environmental and cultural context hence they are the way they are for a variety of reasons.	*Morris and Lomax, 2014.* *Bronfenbrenner , 1979.*
2b. what are the contradictions and potential issues in participant beliefs about how *perfectionism* arises?	Schooling doesn't really have much role to play in how *perfectionism* arises or is maintained. It is largely the family who cause it.	Schools *and* families can help maintain perfectionism or challenge it through their culture, including habits and routines, use of language, role modelling and behavioural reinforcement. There is no definite cause of *perfectionism* and it may be more helpful to look at intervention rather than prevention as a result of this, particularly since prevention programmes have been largely ineffective.	*Fletcher, Neumeister and Flett, 2014.* *Mitchell et al., 2013.* *Essau et al., 2012.*
	Although *perfectionism* and non-*perfectionism* are likely to arise from a combination of nature and nurture,	People who don't have *perfectionist* beliefs are also likely to have developed these through a combination of nature and nurture. An ecosystemic viewpoint would assert that an individual's beliefs, attitudes and values develop through a combination of personal, familial and cultural factors. If *perfectionism* is viewed as a particular way of viewing the	*Bronfenbrenner , 1979.*

	perfectionism is more attributable to nurture and non-*perfectionism* to nature	self/world, this would apply to both individuals with and without these views.	
2c. what are the contradictions and potential issues in participant beliefs about the risks and benefits associated with *perfectionism*?	*Perfectionists* get stressed and are likely to be somewhat unhappy and perhaps missing out on social occasions. However, they are successful, which generally makes people happy. So in effect, they are happy, but stressed.	*Perfectionists* are likely to get stressed as a direct result of their expectations; although they may feel temporary happiness when they achieve their expectations (their own or those perceived to be imposed by others), their expectations are relentless and often unrealistic, meaning they are likely to experience an almost constant state of anxiety about achieving and maintaining these expectations. Further, they are at risk of social isolation and not seeking help when needed. Therefore, they are at a high risk of mental health difficulties and even suicide.	*Weisinger and Lobsenz, 1981.* *Mackinnon, Sherry and Pratt, 2013.* *Flett, 2014.*
	Perfectionism is a mental illness like OCD or disability like autism, which involve suffering on the part of the individual.	*Perfectionism* itself is not considered a mental illness or medical condition in itself. However, it may lead to mental illness. *Perfectionism* is often a symptom of autism. However, with autism, the perfectionism is likely to stem from a cognitive distortion regarding “good enough” with related anxiety, rather than being a perception of social	*Egan, Wade and Shafran, 2011.* *Greenaway and Howlin, 2010.*

	However these also have beneficial features like attention to detail which are needed for certain jobs.	expectation. Socially-prescribed *perfectionism* is therefore more likely connected with attachment than autism. Every individual has strengths as well as difficulties and should perhaps be helped to develop strengths that are not those behaviours meeting more basic (sensory or emotional) needs, which may actually be exploitative.	*Adelson and Wilson, 2009.*
	Perfectionists are successful and likely to go on to do well in life	*Perfectionists* might not necessarily go on to do well and achieve; they may have the ability to achieve but are unable to perform through anxiety. *Perfectionists* may also be low achievers due to fear of failure preventing them taking risks in their learning or even attending school at all. *Perfectionists* may also be unsuccessful through their abilities not matching their expectations, described as 'dysfunctional' or 'unhealthy *perfectionists'*.	*Greenspon, 2000.* *Atkinson et al., 1989.* *Accordino, Accordino and Slaney, 2000.*
2d. What are the contradictions and potential issues in participant beliefs about the changeability of *perfectionism*?	Change is probably hard for a *perfectionist*, and may even be possible only through a drastic event changing their thinking.	Early intervention may help to prevent *perfectionism* becoming stronger. *Perfectionists* may need particular help with stress management and increasing their sense of pride.	*Nugent, 2000.* *Mofield and Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2010.*

	Although there are some practical strategies that could help reduce stress or improve a sense of pride in students generally, there's nothing obvious that can be done by other students, parents or teachers to help *perfectionist* students. It will probably need the person themselves to decide to change, and outside help.	If *perfectionism* is viewed as a collection of thoughts, feelings and behaviours, rather than as a 'label', it becomes much clearer how to intervene, for example targeting areas such as stress and pride.	*Guerra and Bradshaw, 2008.*
		Perfectionist students may not be aware of their own perfectionist thoughts, feelings and behaviours, or if they are, may feel strongly attached to them due to their perceived benefits, so motivation to change may be low.	*Shafran, Egan and Wade, 2010.*
		This is where proactive systemic support can be helpful, utilising home and school strategies to begin to change the student's beliefs.	*Flett and Hewitt, 2014.*
		External professionals may be a valuable resource either to support the systems around the student, or in individual work where systemic intervention is insufficient alone.	
	Perfectionists need help to know it is ok to make a mistake and to 'let it go'. However they	Attitudes towards mistakes is a valid area for intervention, however this is unlikely to be as simple as "letting it go".	*Chan, 2012.*
		There may be clear, small steps towards this, however, that family and school can implement, with the support perhaps of an EP	*DiPrima et al., 2011.*

probably won't listen to this.	to identify the underlying need, baseline, and steps and provision to the desired outcome.	
	There are also other valuable areas for intervention, for example in supporting the student to build social support networks, develop healthy coping strategies, including relaxation, and promoting a balanced lifestyle.	*Nounopoulos, Ashby and Gilman, 2006.*
	If *perfectionism* is an emotional/relational issue, developed through the interaction of personal and environmental factors, there may be a place for improving the communication and relationship between student and home/school, rather than the emphasis being entirely on the student changing themselves.	*DiPrima et al., 2011.*
Students in the study would, on the whole, prefer to be high in *perfectionism* than low, even though they relate *perfectionism* to stress and a poor social life.	*Perfectionism* may be confused with conscientiousness and healthy high achievement/positive learner characteristics. Students may not have a clear construct for these different concepts and hence are perhaps likely to feel trapped within a construct of personality involving desire for success, but inseparable likelihood for stress and isolation.	*Greenspon, 2014.*
	Helping them alter their constructs so that it is possible for one to experience success, happiness and social belonging could be beneficial.	*Ben-Shahar, 2009.*

Table 19

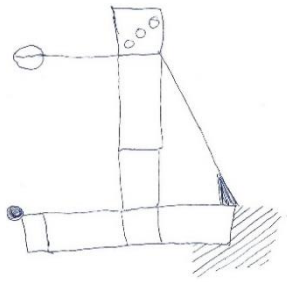
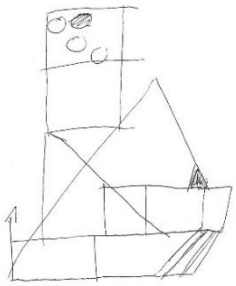
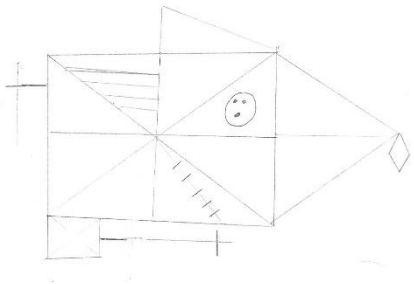
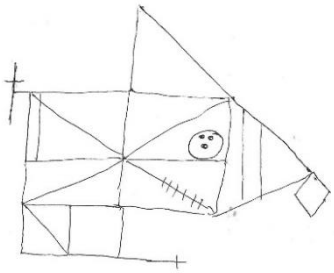
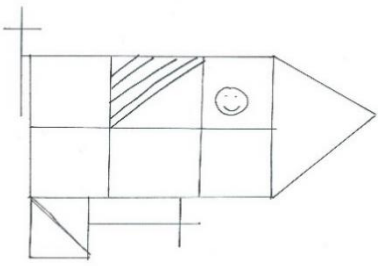
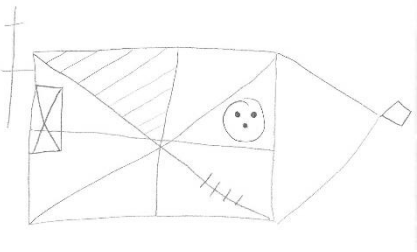
Perfectionism and 'optimalism' ratings by researcher

Student	***Perfectionism* rating**	**'Optimalism' rating**
Brad	Medium	High
Jack	Low	Medium
Matt	Medium	Medium
Harry	Medium	Low
Charlie	Medium	Low
Cato	Medium	Low
Amy^	High	Low
Maddy^	High	Low
Harriet^	Medium	Medium
Emily	Medium	Low
Sage^	Low	Medium
Isabelle	Medium	High
Grace^	High	Low
Jessica	High	Low
Lizzie^	Medium	High
Charlotte	High	Low
Nadia^	Medium	Medium

It may be of interest in future work to explore how *perfectionism* and 'optimalism' mediate each other.

Table 20

A comparison of students high in perfectionism and 'optimalism'

Student (high *perfectionism)*	Opening Activity	Student (high 'optimalism')	Opening Activity
Amy^		Isabelle	
Charlotte		Brad	
Maddy^		Lizzie^	

(Jessica and Grace^ did not do this activity hence there is no entry for them here).

As seen in Table 20, being high in *perfectionism* or 'optimalism' had no discernible effect on the choice of activity nor on the overall precision and accuracy of the drawing, i.e. the success of the task. It was noticeable however that two of the students high in *perfectionism* used rulers for their drawings, perhaps perceiving the 'precise' part of the instruction to be the most salient. Arguably, it was the students high in 'optimalism' who produced the most 'accurate' reproductions.

Table 21 shows the different constructs for success, happiness and 'not *perfectionism'* for the above students. The constructs more accurately relating to 'optimalism' have been highlighted:

Table 21

Select students' success, happiness and 'not perfectionist' constructs

Student	**High in *perfectionism* or 'optimalism'**	**Successful constructs**	**Happy constructs**	**'Not *perfectionist'* constructs**
Amy^	*Perfectionism*	• Hard-working • Liked • Happy	• **Positive outlook**	• **Content with what they're doing** • **Make own perfection rather than fit someone else's**
Charlotte	*Perfectionism*	• Hard-working • **Resilient**	• **Look on the bright side** • **Move on quite quickly**	• Doesn't care • **Happy with what they've got** • **Don't need to be the best**

			• **Don't get too hung up over stuff**	
Grace^	*Perfectionism*	• **Achieves their goals** • **Gets tasks done to their standard**	• Everything going well • Success	• Lazy • Lack motivation
Jessica	*Perfectionism*	• **They have their own standard** • **They achieve their standard**	• No worries • Success	• Don't care • **Go with the flow**
Maddy^	*Perfectionism*	• **Enjoy what they do** • **Work hard**	• Friendly • Smiley	• Don't really care • Slack a lot • Poor attitude to life
Brad	'Optimalism'	• **Motivation** • **Ambition** • **Opportunity**	• Not something you can put into words • **Different for everyone**	• Doesn't try • Bit lazy • Rebel
Isabelle	'Optimalism'	• **Enthusiastic** • **Focused**	• Success • **Good support** • **Positive attitude**	• **Less strict** • More casual • Might not seem to care
Lizzie^	'Optimalism'	• **Focused** • Bright • Clever	• **Friends** • **Family** • Success	• Unfocused • 'Normal'

The table indicates there is no clear pattern to the constructs for success, happiness, or 'not *perfectionist'* for the students high in *perfectionism* or 'optimalism'. This

perhaps reflects the different functions of behaviours for different individuals and supports an individualised approach to intervention, focusing on the unique beliefs and values of the student. The highlighted constructs also indicate that students high in *perfectionism* actually construct their world, in part, around some of the key characteristics of 'optimalism'; notably those relating to how to achieve success. It is therefore of interest to question what prevents them demonstrating more 'optimalist' and less *perfectionist* attitudes towards their own life; this could perhaps be indicated by their happiness constructs differing from 'optimalist' happiness constructs. However, Amy^ and Charlotte are an exception to this, appearing to have a realistic and compassionate understanding of success, happiness and what being a 'not *perfectionist'* looks like. This perhaps reflects different stages of change for these girls as they were both particularly enthusiastic about the produced guidance. Another point of note is the relation for some of the students high in *perfectionism* between success and hard work. From an 'optimalist' perspective, it is working *smart* not working *hard* which helps achieve success, following the Pareto principle and Yerkes-Dodson law.

It is also of interest that none of the 'optimalists' recognised the qualities in themselves that distanced them from *perfectionists*, suggesting awareness-raising for this group too could be beneficial to help them truly identify and capitalise on their strengths. Finally, it is perhaps those students high in *perfectionism* who construct the opposite of a *perfectionist* as having qualities not related to 'optimalism' who are perhaps at greatest risk of remaining high in *perfectionism* and who could therefore benefit most from support to change their constructs.

3a. To what extent do self-rating, teacher-rating, parent-rating and researcher rating correlate for student's 'level' of *perfectionism*?

Table 22 shows the students' self-rating level of *perfectionism*, the rating provided by schools and parents (where available), and that assessed by the researcher. The school and parents were asked for ratings after students had been interviewed to allow the researcher a more objective assessment of the student.

Table 22

Participant and researcher ratings of perfectionism

Student	**Self-rating**	**Parental rating (where available)**	**School rating**	**Researcher rating**
Brad	Medium	n/a	High	Medium
Jack	Medium/high	n/a	Low	Low
Matt	Medium/high	n/a	Low	Medium
Harry	Medium/high	n/a	High	Medium
Charlie	Medium	n/a	Unsure	Medium
Cato	Medium/high	n/a	Low	Medium
Amy^	High	High	High	High
Maddy^	Medium/high	Medium/high	Medium	High
Harriet^	Medium	Low	Low	Medium
Emily	Unsure	n/a	High	Medium
Sage^	Unsure	Medium/high	Medium	Low
Isabelle	Medium/high	n/a	Low	Medium

Grace^	High	High	High	High
Jessica	High	n/a	High	High
Lizzie^	Unsure	High	High	Medium
Charlotte	Unsure	n/a	High	High
Nadia^	Unsure	High	High	Medium

Table 24

Correlations between ratings of student perfectionism by parent, researcher, student and school (n=7/8)

		Parent rating of student *perfectionism*	Researcher rating of student *perfectionism*	Student rating of own *perfectionism*	School rating of student *perfectionism*
Parent rating of student *perfectionism*	Pearson Correlation	1	-.091	.636	.175
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.846	.124	.707
	N	7	7	7	7
Researcher rating of student *perfectionism*	Pearson Correlation	-.091	1	-.228	.165
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.846		.588	.695
	N	7	8	8	8
Student rating of own *perfectionism*	Pearson Correlation	.636	-.228	1	-.038
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.124	.588		.929
	N	7	8	8	8
School rating of student *perfectionism*	Pearson Correlation	.175	.165	-.038	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.707	.695	.929	
	N	7	8	8	8

The high correlation between researcher ratings for students and their parents are shown below:

Table 25

Correlations between researcher ratings for student and parent perfectionism (n=8)

	Perfectionism of parent as identified by researcher	*Perfectionism* of student as identified by researcher
Perfectionism of parent as identified by researcher	1	.878* (sig. .004)

* correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 26

Student self- and parent-rating of perfectionism

Participant	**Self-rating**	**Rating of mother**	**Rating of father**
Jack	Medium/high	High	High
Matt	Medium/high	Medium/high	Medium/high
Grace^	High	Medium/low	High
Jessica	High	Low	Medium/high
Amy^	High	Medium	Unsure
Maddy^	Medium/high	Medium	Unsure
Harriet^	Medium	High	Unsure
Sage^	Medium/high	Medium	Unsure
Isabelle	Medium/high	Medium	Unsure
Emily	Medium	Unsure	Unsure
Brad	Medium	Unsure	Unsure

Harry	Medium/high	Unsure	Unsure
Charlie	Medium	Unsure	Unsure
Cato	Medium/high	Unsure	Unsure
Lizzie^	Medium/low	Unsure	Unsure
Charlotte	Medium	Unsure	Unsure
Nadia^	Medium/high	Unsure	Unsure

Table 27

Correlations between student self-rating and student rating of parent perfectionism

		Student's own self-rating of *perfectionism*	Student identifies mother *perfectionism*	Student identifies father *perfectionism*
Student's own self-rating of *perfectionism*	Pearson Correlation	1	-.293	.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.411	1.000
	N	17	10	4
Student identifies mother *perfectionism*	Pearson Correlation	-.293	1	.130
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.411		.870
	N	10	10	4
Student identifies father *perfectionism*	Pearson Correlation	.000	.130	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000	.870	
	N	4	4	4

3b. Which aspects of the research approach were the most helpful for identifying possible needs relating to *perfectionism* amongst students?

Table 28

The usefulness of each approach

Aspect of research approach	Helpfulness	Advantages	Disadvantages
Staff rating of student	*Low* – gives an indication of staff views which may be having an impact on the individual, but relates only weakly to other measures.	Staff know the student better than a visiting EP.	Staff are likely to be using their own constructs of *perfectionism* to make this judgement. This may be based on stereotypes. Asking for this rating and giving no feedback perhaps reinforces school's belief that their rating is valid and worthwhile.
Discussion with student, including structured activities, discussion, and behavioural observation throughout the interview.	*High* – the range of approaches within the interview allowed a detailed observation to be formed and analysed.	Allows for objective assessment based on behavioural observation. Hears the student's voice which provides a unique insight into their experience. Empowering experience for a student which may begin to promote change in itself.	Provides only a snapshot; observations over time and in different settings would be beneficial. Short session means rapport must be built quickly; student may struggle to give honest answers.

Discussion with parent of student, including structured activity, discussion, and behavioural observation throughout the interview.	*Medium* – gives a helpful insight into parental values which are likely to be transferred to the child, along with parental interpretation of their child's behaviour.	Parent arguably knows the student best so may be able to provide the most accurate account. Similarities and differences can be identified and interpreted between child and parent. The interview itself may provide prompt for parental change which positively benefits the student.	Parent may not be objective about their child's behaviour. Child may behave very differently at home than at school.

8.11 Appendix K: Data Analysis (Phase Two: the professionals)

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Sample phone interview excerpt (David):

I mean I guess one is around the family and actually the family's willingness to support the child

Yes

And how the family can understand the importance I guess of the ideas in the treatment I guess some of them are not able to see beyond what's happening in the moment or think actually about how things might be in the future so I think that absolutely, resources and time within schools that's another big thing I think erm but also I think the biggest thing I think is systems and processes so if I think a number of these things that we're talking about a good teacher and a very caring teacher would probably, it'd probably be found that they're already spotting these things and are able to address them in a very local level in their classes with children but it's something about how that can become more systemised

Yes

I think erm that there is you know clear processes and when does something need to be taken out

Yes

Of either a very informal process where the teacher might talk with the whole class about what's it like to make mistakes to something like for example where someone like yourself might become more involved

Yes that sort of graduated approach when does it sort of peak and you need an external person in

Absolutely

Yeah

Absolutely and different people have different thresholds

Yes

Different senses of when something's concerning and when it isn't

Yes

So much pressures on so you know just thinking about challenges so much pressures on teachers I guess

Figure 32. Example interview transcript (Phase Two).

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Early codes were: perspective on data, interventions, and EP role. These merged into:

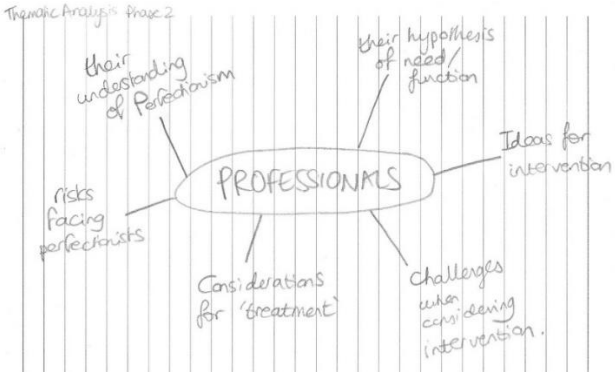


Figure 33. Generating initial codes (Phase Two).

Phase 3: Searching for themes

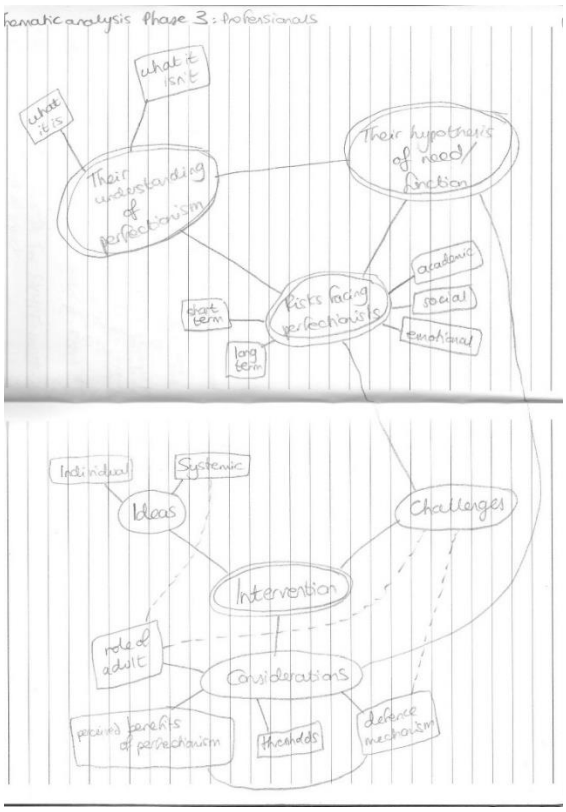


Figure 34. Searching for themes (Phase Two).

Phase 4: Reviewing the themes

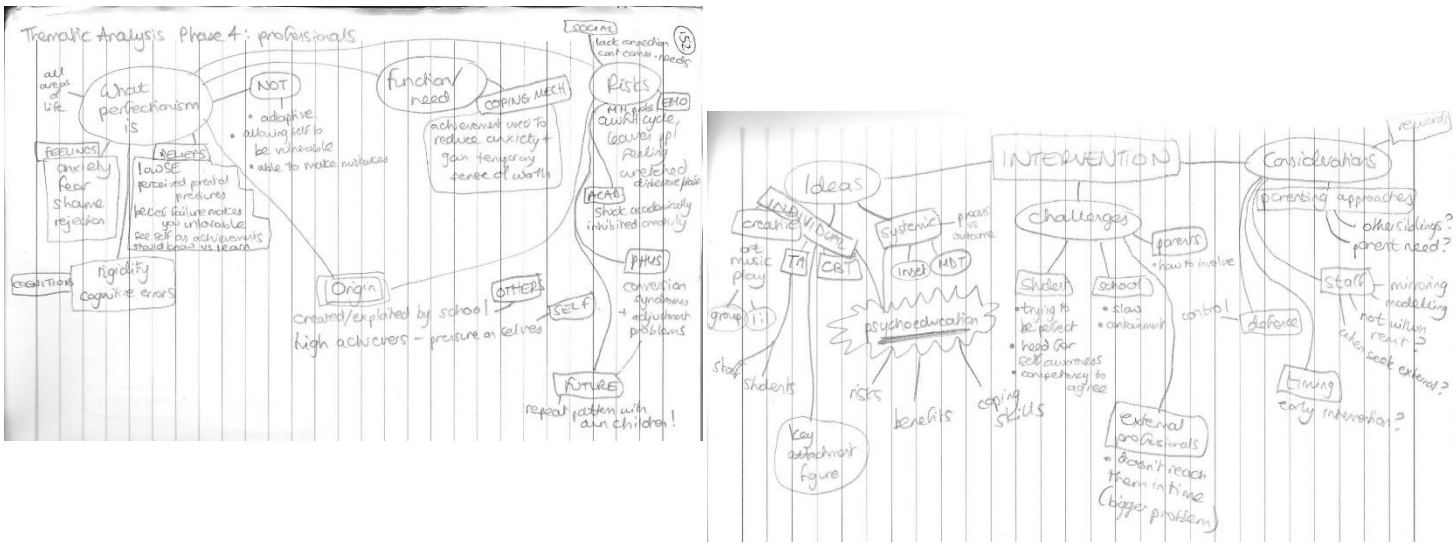


Figure 35. Reviewing the themes (Phase Two).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

The overall themes from the professionals' interviews are below, followed by a narrative account for each one.

a. Perfectionism is:

b. Risks for perfectionists

c. Considerations for the research

d. Ideas for intervention

e. Challenges

a. Perfectionism is:

Amongst the professionals, there was a wide range of knowledge and understanding, largely in support of the literature. For example, there was a sub-theme of beliefs relating to *perfectionism*, such as the belief that failure makes one unlovable, perceived parental pressures and that one should know already rather than have to learn. There was a further sub-theme of cognitions such as errors and rigidity, with some association with ASC and a low self-esteem or not wanting to be found lacking or not knowing. There was also a sub-theme of emotions, less visible in the literature but recurring in Phase One participant comments, such as anxiety, but also with recognition of fear, shame and rejection and the notion of being "*trapped in an awful cycle that leaves people feeling wretched*" (David). It was of note that there was spontaneous discussion amongst some professionals of what *perfectionism* is not, for example the idea that it is not a person who is adaptive, or who allows themselves to make mistakes and be vulnerable. This is of help when

considering the desired state for students high in *perfectionism*. There was some recognition of the possibility for *perfectionism* in different areas of a person's life, such as hobbies and appearance, and a general sense across all professionals that *perfectionism* was largely a container for (and maintained by) anxiety. There was also suggestion that *perfectionism* was about gaining approval or attention, and the concern that it may be created or exploited by schools. One participant (Shane) specifically related *perfectionism* to high-achieving students from clinical experience, who put high levels of pressure on themselves.

Amongst the EPs in particular, John felt that *perfectionists* are people who do not know when to stop, despite only achieving perhaps marginal gains for "*going on and on and over stuff*" and hence lacking a sense of pragmatism. This again relates to the Pareto principle. He described it as if "*they haven't got an off button, or a pause button*". John recognised that there may appear to be positive benefits, giving the example of Olympic athletes and other world champions, and talked about the achievements of the individuals who worked at Bletchley Park. He did, however, highlight that the key figure here killed himself. For John:

> If it isn't a problem, it's not a problem, I think it might not be a problem if it's not interfering with them as people.

The key factor for John in *perfectionism* being a problem is if the person does not have friends or a social outlet.

Simon felt that *perfectionist* type behaviours

> often emerge as a result of feeling unable to or being worried about taking a risk with their learning through fear of failure,

believing that perhaps they have

> got the wrong end of the stick about the point of learning.

He also highlighted the need to "*never ever take things on face value*" when working with a student with "*perfectionist type behaviour*", as the behaviour may be a mask for something much deeper that needs addressing. Instead, EPs "*should try to understand a lot more than the surface behaviour*" if they want to support that child, giving the example of students who have suffered "*some really quite horrendous abuse in their past*" which may have resulted in the *perfectionist* type behaviour. Simon was also very clear about the use of language and avoiding 'diagnosing' students, advising instead that we use the term as a description rather than a cause and try to delve deep into

> precisely what is resulting in this behaviour and why a child feels the need to exhibit these sorts of behaviours.

Jeremy discussed the notion of relative deprivation and the development of *perfectionism* through students comparing themselves with their peers. From experience working in high-achieving village schools, he felt this to be a "*very valuable area*" to look at,

> from a number of psychological perspectives but also maybe on a philosophical level as well,

discussing discourses and where the notion of *perfectionism* comes from, and what the function was of creating that discourse. Jeremy also suggested that *perfectionist* behaviours emerge as a result of not feeling able to control anything else in one's environment; one's own behaviour may feel like the only thing a student can control.

b. Risks for perfectionists

There was a clearer sense amongst the professionals than amongst Phase One participants of the risks associated with *perfectionism.* Professionals talked about both short- and long-term risks, balanced across the areas of social development, emotional wellbeing, physical health and academic progress. There was specific mention of mental health difficulties such as eating disorders and self-harm. It was of note that the health professionals in particular were concerned about the effect of students high in *perfectionism* repeating the pattern of behaviour with their own children in the future, supporting a social learning model of development.

c. Considerations for the research

There were some helpful considerations identified, including the adults around the student and the student themselves. Health professionals appeared particularly concerned about the family system as a whole, with recognition that parenting approaches, if overly-critical, may be having an impact on the wider family unit and therefore consideration must be given to our professional responsibility to other children in the family. Regarding school staff, there was recognition amongst the psychotherapists and counsellor that there is likely to be an element of mirroring of *perfectionism* between pressurised staff and students, so ‘good enough’ modelling may be required for both adult and young person with support for staff if necessary. This supports the psychodynamic elements of the current study. There was some debate over whether supporting students high in *perfectionism* is within the teacher’s remit, and if so, perhaps more training and time is needed for them to fulfil this duty. Considerations relating to the individual student included the identification of

'rewards' the student is currently getting from their behaviour, particularly considering the idea of defence against anxiety and perhaps even reaping rewards in areas not requiring creativity. There was an interesting sub-theme here also of the notion of 'pathological' and where the thresholds would be for this issue, perhaps highlighting the particular training and role of health professionals. An agreement appeared to be that personality patterns are largely fixed by late adolescence, so early intervention is indicated.

Amongst the EPs, John's tips for producing guidance included ensuring it is something you are enthusiastic about as a researcher and have contemporary knowledge about. Another tip was for it to be very user friendly and not too academic; balancing the need for it to be based on theory but school-friendly, but without it being so obvious that there is no need for it. He referred to Vygotsky for this need to get the right level in order to engage the audience of the guidance. He advised discussing ideas with schools in order to get their feedback on the demand for the guidance and identifying the specific need. Where there is no awareness of demand, John advised creating a demand by explaining the problems, and ensuring the guidance is trialled with the people with responsibility and power in the school. These points are all addressed in the current research.

John also highlighted the importance of making a plan for the timeline of the guidance with a clear final outcome in mind. John felt producing a document could be beneficial as schools are able to collect it from the Internet or from the EP in person. However he prefers delivering guidance through face-to-face courses in

order to get feedback. This could present future opportunities for sharing the guidance. John saw exciting opportunities for the future of the research, suggesting writing articles, getting research published, paralleling it with a course to run in schools and expanding this out, eventually producing a book which can be accessed nationally.

Jeremy agreed that the information being conveyed in the guidance should be "*at the cutting edge of where thinking is at*", so either based on one's own research or from ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) within the role of EP, in order to get a sense of what the current thinking is around the topic and what the "*helpful next steps to include*" would be. Jeremy felt strongly that operationalising guidance can result in a positive impact which can be really personally satisfying. He also felt it keeps one thinking in research terms so that one's EP practice can include the latest research. He believes EPs are in a really key position to take a lead role in producing guidance and documentation policies within the local authority due to their skills base and CPD. This is an aspect of the EP role I would be interested to pursue following the current research experience.

d. Ideas for intervention

The external professionals were incredibly helpful in their discussions of interventions they would consider for students high in *perfectionism*. They all considered both individual and systemic ideas, reflecting the current psychological climate, though were able to offer individual intervention ideas based upon their own training background and professions. Ideas here included creative approaches such

as art, music or play therapy, either individually or in a group context. This was explained by Mary to be a helpful analogy for letting out the messy feelings a student may be trying to repress with *perfectionism*. Other psychodynamic perspectives included the use of a key attachment figure for the student to develop their emotional identity, and the use of transactional analysis to identify both student and adult drivers for behaviour. Mindfulness and CBT were commonly-occurring ideas across a number of participants, for example keeping a positives log of areas of worth outside of academic achievement, or the use of a continuums exercise of extremes with the young person identifying the qualities of people they know and rating themselves, reflecting the PCP approach utilised in Phase One of the current study.

More systemically, suggestions included the school and family placing an emphasis on processes rather than outcomes and teaching students early on about thinking patterns. A suggestion here from Liz was to encourage student debates on areas of *perfectionism* such as the perfect body in order to raise awareness of thinking patterns. A couple of professionals suggested staff training in order to challenge beliefs that *perfectionism* is positive and to know when to refer on to external professionals. However there was limited recognition that staff too may require support, for example in raising their self-esteem and coping mechanisms so that they are well-placed to support students. All professionals supported a multi-disciplinary approach, involving student, family and school where possible rather than working with the student in isolation.

Amongst the EPs, John felt that distraction was a helpful strategy for younger students with *perfectionist* type behaviour, helping them move onto another task once one has been completed to a good enough standard, though this may be more difficult for older students for whom *perfectionism* may have become a deeper personality trait. He also believed that a focus on processes rather than outcomes could help, and felt resilience is an important factor. John highlighted the importance of liaising with parents and working in unison with them and the school.

Simon felt there was a valuable role for the EP in working with students with *perfectionist* behaviours, suggesting a "*gold standard*" of meeting with the parents and teacher or SENCO to discuss the situation and agree next steps. He would want to

> dig quite deep into why a person might be *perfectionist* and what precisely they might need

before recommending any next steps. An important aspect of this process would be a review cycle, in which the work would be evaluated through analysing what the adults and child are saying regarding comfort level with challenge or difficulty (or whatever seems to be underpinning the *perfectionist* type behaviour). Simon favours a discursive approach as he finds inventory-type approaches "*a little sort of restricting*", and finds the consultation approach helpful for explaining the thought processes, acknowledging the concerns people have and asking and answering questions to clarify understanding.

Simon described the need to "*make that distinction between knowing and learning*" in order to systemically change the rhetoric around this, as currently a lot of

education assessments are based on crystallised knowledge and understanding rather than assessing the ways in which children learn and understand things. The dynamic assessment activity in the current research supports this move. He felt that an important intervention would be:

> focussing on the attitudes and viewpoint of staff when they're working with children and how we convey the importance of learning and how we teach children what it is to learn.

He suggested the use of the question "*how do you know when you're learning something, tell me about a time when you've learnt",* to help students move away from feeling the important thing is knowing rather than learning.

Jeremy emphasised the need to look at the impact the *perfectionist* behaviours were having, giving the example of an above-average achieving pupil who "*went on a little bit of a self-destruct course*" due to comparing himself with even higher achieving students and experiencing pressure from his parents and teachers "*to do more and to do better*", which "*created such a tension for him*", resulting in challenging behaviours and exclusion. Jeremy's approach would be the use of projective based assessments such as kinetic family and school drawings to identify what was going on for the young person and why, particularly looking for elements of competition and anxiety. He would then employ PCP to elicit what they think about themselves in terms of their ideal self, then formulate a hypothesis and an action point from there. This somewhat mirrors and provides practical support for the research approach.

The EPs provided the following helpful tips for producing the guidance:

- Plan the production of guidance from start to end point

- Keep it user-friendly and jargon-free; think Vygotsky – right level!
- Base it on what schools actually want/will find helpful; Helpful next steps
- Raise awareness – nudge open (JoHari) window to highlight need (create need/demand through awareness raising) and change attitudes gradually, e.g. distinguishing between knowing and learning
- Keep attention, mix things up and show enthusiasm
- Bit of contemporary research/theory but mostly practical applications
- Document to access online or give in person
- Work with parents and school together
- Build resilience
- Trial the guidance with those in power/responsibility
- In future, write up research, publish article then develop a training course. Go on to publish a book and contribute to documentation policies in the local authority so the guidance can be of widespread value.

e. Challenges

The external professionals also identified some helpful considerations regarding possible challenges to the above intervention ideas. These included challenges relating to the student, such as trying to be ‘perfect’ at therapy and therefore making the discussions academic rather than personally meaningful. Another consideration was the high level of self-awareness required which may not be evident for all students high in *perfectionism* and may indeed be part of the problem. Those professionals who specifically work with young people also highlighted the issue of how to engage students in therapy, and their competency to agree. Amongst the

adults around the student, challenges discussed included how to involve parents and staff who may not feel that *perfectionism* is something to be tackled, or do not feel able to tackle it. There was also concern amongst many participants that since therapy is a slow progress, schools may struggle to offer the long-term support needed to contain the therapy, or may see it as an unwanted expense. These are all helpful considerations when planning guidance for schools and families.

Amongst the EPs, John explained that EPs tend to develop specialities within their service based on their individual interests and skill, so that guidance from each EP fits together as an overall part of the service delivery. However John acknowledged that this may be affected as services become more traded, indicating the need to ensure it is something that schools would feel the need to buy. John discussed that *perfectionists* may lack self-awareness so would not necessarily engage in any support to tackle their *perfectionist* behaviours. He used the metaphor of a runaway train rolling on, eventually going off the tracks. He also acknowledged that with current Ofsted pressures to focus on outcomes rather than processes it would be hard for schools to move away from being target-driven.

Simon described the main difficulty as being addressing the issue of *perfectionism* with schools and parents as "*people have a very fixed idea of intelligence and thinking*". He also highlighted that sometimes schools or parents want a label for the student to explain everything and if the EP addresses the need for adults to change the way they approach the situation this may not have been what the school or

parents were expecting, which may be challenging to address for the best interests of the student.

Jeremy talked about the difficulties within local authorities of having to put the guidance through "*an inordinate amount of different processes and committees*" which is very time-consuming. It may also feel as though "*you were treading on other peoples' toes*" which can cause "*unnecessary quibbles about unnecessary aspects of what was being done*". He also talked about ensuring one is clear about the target audience. Another difficulty Jeremy mentioned was other services lacking awareness of what EPs can do in terms of producing systemic guidance, and in the current climate of some local authorities being reduced to statutory-only service this kind of systemic work may not even be possible. These are all valid and relevant considerations within the current climate and so apply to the guidance being produced within the research.

1. What may be considered helpful strategies for supporting students high in *perfectionism*?

Table 29

Guiding information from each source

Source	What is *perfectionism*?	Risks for *perfectionists*	Considerations
1a. The literature	• Straining compulsively and unceasingly toward unobtainable goals • Measurement of self-worth by productivity and accomplishment • May or may not result in high achievement.	Linked with: • a range of mental health difficulties • under-achievement • social isolation • suicide.	• May act as a coping mechanism and appear to result in positive outcomes valued by the individual or those around them, e.g. accomplishment. • Likely to arise from a combination of a genetic 'vulnerability' and environmental factors, leading to individual cognitive errors. • Reinforced through environmental factors and lack of experimentation with alternative behaviours. • Perfectionism may not be able to be fully eradicated (Nobel, Manassis and Wilansky-Traynor, 2012)

1b. External professionals	• not wanting to be found lacking or not knowing • a container for (and maintained by) anxiety, driven by fear, shame and rejection • having an underlying low self-esteem • not being adaptive to new ways of learning or allowing oneself to be vulnerable • comparable with autism in terms of rigidity • linked with perceived parental pressures/about seeking parental approval or attention • created and/or exploited by schools • believing failure makes one unlovable, so unable to make mistakes • believing one is only seen and accepted as one's achievements rather than as a full human being; achievement used to reduce anxiety and gain temporary sense of worth	• becoming stuck academically, reduced capacity to reason • inhibited creativity and experimentation • finding it hard to connect with others/relationship difficulties • struggling to believe praise and unlikely to seek feedback • managing transitions, including changes in rules, boundaries or pressures • conversion syndromes, e.g. headaches, stomach pain, feeling sick etc • adjustment problems when faced with physical illness	• parenting approaches, over-critical? Could we spot signs in parents that might raise our awareness of their children's needs? Do we have a duty to consider other children in the family? Support for family? • sense of control when feeling powerless or unsupported, defence against anxiety? • mirroring of perfectionism between pressurised staff and students; need for 'good enough' modelling? Support for teaching staff? • may reap rewards in areas not requiring creativity? • not within teacher's remit to support as lack training and time? • when does it become pathological (thresholds)? • personality patterns fixed by late adolescence: need for early intervention?

	• creating expectations that are impossible to meet, therefore trapped in an awful cycle that leaves people feeling wretched • a combination of cognitive errors; mental filtering, black-and-white thinking, "compare and despair" • applicable to hobbies as well as academia, e.g. arts, music, sports etc, and also appearance e.g. images in magazines • the belief that one should already know and not have to learn • often seen in high-achieving older teens, putting huge pressures on themselves to perform to their best all the time	• vulnerability for mental health issues: stress, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, obsessiveness, OCD • not identifying one's own needs, or not able to communicate them • eventual repeated patterns with own children

1c. EPs	• Related to relative deprivation; students comparing themselves with others, e.g. in high-achieving schools • Not knowing when to stop, lacking a sense of pragmatism and "good enough" • Marginal gains only from persisting at a task • Complex; must uncover why the individual child is displaying these behaviours rather than taking them at face value. • Being worried about taking a risk with learning through fear of failure; confusion between learning and knowing.	• Mental health problems • Challenging behaviour • Failure at school • Social isolation	• Foucault; consider the discourse of perfection and where that might have come from, what function it serves to create that discourse • Skill set; this may make it more likely a student can or cannot achieve perfection • Is it possible to be both a *perfectionist* and have a balanced life? If so, perhaps their *perfectionism* isn't a problem. • Don't take behaviours on face value; *perfectionism* is likely to be the tip of the iceberg and we must dig deeper. • Important *perfectionism* doesn't become another diagnosis; it is a description not a cause

1d. Students, parents, teachers	Related to: • high expectations and achievement, positive learner characteristics and 'being' perfect • a need for order and control • self-criticism resulting in anxiety	• Missing out on leisure and social time • Feeling stressed • Annoying to others • Maybe mental health problems	• Participants largely believed that a perfectionist student would be happy as they are likely to be achieving their goals Considered to be: • a trait, covering all areas of a person's life, particularly academia • desirable despite the perception of associated stress, as strongly linked with success • Perfectionism arises from a combination of nature and nurture factors, predominantly nurture, and school may play a part • Related by some to mental illness

1e. Psychological theory

Table 30

Strategies for possible underlying needs

Function of *perfectionism*	**Desired outcome of intervention**	**Strategies**
Cognitive need (reinforcement of cognitive errors): student struggles to construct a sense of what is required for successful completion or engagement in a task.	Student has coping strategies, including thought-challenging skills	CBT approach, e.g. challenge underlying thoughts. Accepting/safe environment in which to carry out behaviour experiments. Explicit expectations and clear reinforcement.
Emotional need (acceptance, love, nurture): student has learned that they need to *keep achieving* in order to please the significant people in their life and get their survival needs met.	Student has coping strategies, including assertiveness skills	Attachment strategies, e.g. key person, developing emotional literacy, opportunities to express feelings. Accepting/safe environment in which to feel emotionally secure. Explicit expectations and clear reinforcement.
Social need (social communication skills): student struggles to understand social relationships and therefore puts their efforts and attention into achieving in an attempt to control the anxiety of social interactions.	Student has coping strategies, including effective social communication skills	Teach social thinking skills, provide opportunities to interact with positive role models. Accepting/safe environment in which to practise skills. Explicit expectations and clear reinforcement.
Neurological or sensory need (order, predictability, routine): student finds the environment overwhelming and seeks out perfection to regain sense of control and calm.	Student has coping strategies, including anxiety management	Provide a predictable environment, minimise changes, provide visual supports and sensory breaks. Accepting/safe environment in which individual differences are celebrated and bullying challenged. Explicit expectations and clear reinforcement.

Table 31

Strategies using the multi-element model

	Student	**Family**	**School**	**External professionals**	**Society/ media/ government**
PROACTIVE STRATEGIES					
Teaching New Skills - recognising what the individual needs to learn to manage the situation better	Self-reflection and Resiliency (Prince-Embury, 2006), including: • Sense of mastery • Sense of relatedness • Emotion Regulation (APA, 2016) • Communication • Self-esteem • Problem-solving • Planning • Emotion regulation (individually or group-work). Core competency building (Guerra and Bradshaw, 2008), including: • A positive sense of self • Self-control • Decision-making skills • A moral system of belief	• Self-reflection and resiliency	• Staff self-reflection and resiliency • Identify students' aspirations as well as achievement; monitor the discrepancy between the two	n/a	n/a

	• Pro-social connectedness Acceptance of: • Failure • Success • Emotion • Reality (Ben-Shahar, 2009)				
Environmental Changes - encouraging positive responses/actions	n/a	• Opportunities to openly share thoughts and feelings • Praise efforts and progress, de-emphasise performance and outcome • Lead by example; model 'imperfection' and healthy coping skills • Share books and films to explicitly illustrate "flawed protagonists" • Development of the 'whole child' rather than purely focus on academic achievement • Open and regular liaison	• Encouragement of growth mindset and attributional retraining; praise efforts and progress and make use of formative assessment as a tool to teach learning from mistakes • Lead by example • Availability of key person • Share books to illustrate "flawed protagonists" • Development of the 'whole child' rather than purely focus on academic achievement; use portfolios and reflection to help student recognise strengths • Incorporate practice on	• Capacity-building systemic input from EP • MDT collaboration to identify schools and students causing concern	• Increased awareness-raising of link between perfectionism and negative outcomes • Increased focus on process vs outcomes • Increased funding for mental health support in schools

	between home and school • Promote self-acceptance and self-compassion to overcome self-criticism • Help student set realistic short-,medium- and long-term goals in multiple areas of life • Engage in fun activities that are not an area of strength; emphasise enjoyment over perfection • Celebrate project completion rather than project result • Help student create and use a balanced timetable for their activities • Help student prioritise • Hold discussions	students' weaknesses into topics or areas of strength • Open and regular liaison between home and school • Promote self-acceptance and self-compassion to overcome self-criticism • Accept students' goals and aspirations, but encourage them to see them as long-term requiring effort and revision; help students reframe short-term goals as long-term goals • Connect before correct; form trusting relationship to provide safe environment for critique • Provide lots of small opportunities to take risks • Redefine success as taking a risk • Help student break larger projects into smaller subtasks

		during low-stress times • Use family projects as a way to model positive behaviours • Discuss problems of asynchrony	• Help student create and use a balanced timetable for their activities • Help student prioritise • Careful use of language; emphasis on effort and process rather than outcome or comparisons with others • Discuss problems of asynchrony	
Focussed Support/ Reinforcement - increasing the likelihood of positive change	n/a	• Reinforcement/ praise/reward for risk-taking • Play semi-competitive games to model and encourage healthy competitive attitudes and behaviour • Carefully monitor competitive situations with siblings • Help student set personal not comparative goals	• Reinforcement/praise/reward for risk-taking • Use of bibliotherapy; read about and discuss role-models' losses or failures and invite guest speakers to share their experiences • Role-play frustrations and assertiveness • Help students set personal not comparative goals	• Schools rewarded for levels of emotional wellbeing of staff and students • Students' progress measured rather than comparing outcome with others of same age

REACTIVE STRATEGIES			
Responsive Strategies - sometimes necessary to stop a situation getting worse	• Access to 'safe space' for relaxation as needed	Individually-tailored therapeutic support from medical professionals; cognitive-behavioural and psychodynamic approaches	• Balanced reporting of student suicides to reflect on *perfectionism*

The stages of change model applied to *perfectionism*:

A student in quadrant 'PRE-CONTEMPLATION AND CONTEMPLATION' would present the highest level of concern in terms of their risk of negative outcomes due to lacking motivation to change yet experiencing high (unfavourable) discrepancy between their expectations and achievement.

A student in quadrant 'PREPARATION AND ACTION (HIGH PRIORITY)' is also at risk as they have identified that they are not happy the way they are, though at slightly less risk as they are motivated to change therefore will be better able to participate in individual intervention.

A student in quadrant 'PREPARATION AND ACTION (LOW PRIORITY)' is at reduced risk as although they would like to change from the way they are, there is little discrepancy between their expectations and achievement so as a risk factor for *perfectionism*, this is not a major concern.

A student in quadrant 'MAINTENANCE AND TERMINATION' is at the point at which there would be no further concerns about their level of *perfectionism*, though occasional monitoring may be beneficial to ensure the student isn't returning either up or across the axes (a "relapse").

2. How can guidance most effectively be disseminated?

Table 32

Comparison of dissemination methods

Preferred dissemination method	**Source**	**Advantages for this research**	**Disadvantages for this research**
SCHOOL-BASED for staff			
One-off staff INSET	Literature EP Staff	Time-effective. Large audience. Can be carried out by school staff to further build capacity. Can be repeated as needed. Supports systemic change.	Not sufficient to facilitate and sustain change in the school system (Georgiades and Phillimore, 1975); more needed in addition.
Consultation	EP Literature	Already begun in Phase One with positive feedback from participants. Particularly beneficial when leadership engaged (Greatest influence on behavioural	Time consuming to do individual consultations. Research contact not always in a position of leadership in the school; majority of interviews

		change; Fullan, 2003; Norwich and Kelly, 2005).	done with people lacking power within school.
Resource pack/workbook	Staff	School staff take ownership over change. Can be personalised to the student. Staff-student relationship can develop.	Time-consuming to produce, trial and edit.
SCHOOL-BASED for students or parents			
Eye-catching posters	Student	Reasonably quick and easy to produce. Accessible to whole school community. Memorable.	Posters soon become 'wallpaper' so may have time-limited effectiveness. Limited information can be included so more work would need to be done to support this method. Not personalised so individuals may not identify with it.
Handout/leaflet/ list	Students Parents	Reasonably quick and easy to produce. Quick and easy to read. Can reach large audience if costs kept low for production. Can be referred to regularly. Easy for school to store to give out in future as needed.	Not personalised so individuals may not identify with it. Individuals may not choose to read it. Requires extra input from motivated member of staff to support.

		Can pique interest so individuals can seek more information if desired.	Careful consideration needed of how to give out and timing of giving out.
Discussion/presentation, either in a group or one to one	Students Parents	Can be personalised to the particular individuals. Large audience possible. Up-to-date information. Supportive group or interaction in itself through meeting with someone who understands and cares, and other people who experience the same.	Time-consuming to speak one-to-one. Hard to engage parents in optional pastoral talks. Some people would switch off during group talks.
EXTERNAL			
Electronic/website/social media	EP Staff Students	Individuals can seek information/support in privacy and in their own time. Up-to-date, current information. More continuous than a one-off leaflet, e.g. social media updates pop up on phone. Social media account easy to set up. E-mail easy to produce and share.	Risks feeling un-personalised so individuals may not identify with it. Relies on individuals choosing to access the information. Needs continual updating and maintenance. Time-consuming and expensive to set up (website).
Article/book	EP	Participants have all expressed great interest in the research, suggesting a possible place for *future* dissemination via this method.	Time-consuming. May not be accessible to intended audience. Not personalised. Limited evidence to generalise.

To further refine the production of guidance I looked specifically at the desires of the students scoring 'high' in *perfectionism* according to my observations. The results of this analysis are highlighted in the following table:

Table 33

Desired guidance of students high in perfectionism

Student	Desired format of guidance	Target audience
Amy^	I think what would probably help me is probably **something like a little book**, something that's…that can be really precious and important to you *So you can take it away, you can keep it?* And have it to reflect back so whenever you feel like it's a little, a little blanket *That makes sense, like you say it's almost like a security blanket* Yeah! (Laughs) *So you know it's there, whenever you want it you can go and have a dip in, have a look at some tips* Yeah! (Laughs)	Self
Maddy^	Maybe like a group, like a letter home to everyone *Yeah?* Cos I think the parents would def…would definitely know if their child's a *perfectionist* *Yeah* So **a letter home** saying here's erm, they're willing to send in, what would they like, give them the options, see if they'd want a talk or a booklet even for them the **parents to be able to have the booklet** cos they would read it, to have help helping their child themselves *So maybe go straight to the families?*	Family

	Yeah yeah yeah!	
Grace^	I don't feel like leaflets tend to help because sometimes when you do have the pressures and the stress the free time you don't tend to spend on reading on lots, but I feel more like **meetings and things like this** people find it easier like in one to one or a group to talk through it. Like a leaflet and like a video, sometimes you tend to be put into that one category and all things apply whereas I think everyone is different so you tend not to find those helpful because we're all different so it might not all apply.	Self/group
Charlotte	I'm not sure really because it depends, because you could do an **assembly** on it but lots of people don't really pay attention to assemblies and stuff *Mm* Not quite sure if… *It's quite tricky actually* It is *To get that information across* Some people will like listen and take it in and pay attention but I'm not, not everyone would…	Whole school
Jessica	I think yeah if you can talk to someone about your problems rather than, cos if you've got a leaflet you're just kind of reading kind of what that leaflet's teaching you as such, but if you **can talk to someone about it who understands and you're comfortable talking with** them about it, they can give you ideas, you can give them ideas and it will probably relieve a bit of that pressure and stress. I think not kind of just one-off sessions maybe if you, they're regular so you can see progress and you kind of go through it together if that makes sense?	Self

This highlights a range of ideas and the guidance attempts to meet all.

8.12 Appendix L: Guidance considerations and action plan

The following outlines the considerations for what to include in the guidance, based upon discussions with all participants and reflection on the literature around dissemination of information.

What information to disseminate

What *Perfectionism* is and isn't, spectrum model

Associated thoughts, feelings, behaviours

Risks

Illusion of maintenance factors

How to move along spectrum – balance, talk, build resilience

Who the users are

1. School staff

2. Parents

3. Students (Year 9 and 10)

What is being offered to them?

An explanation of what *perfectionism* is and isn't.

Strategies to support emotional wellbeing.

What benefits or outcomes are desired from the dissemination?

1. Improved knowledge about *perfectionism* in students.

2. Improved understanding of *perfectionism* in students.

3. Motivation to change/do things differently, including sharing the information with others.

How these can best be presented as benefits and solutions to the users?

Use of psychology, taking into account Vygotsky (i.e. get it at the right level), e.g. stages of change theory, Yerkes-Dodson law, Maslow's hierarchy, CBT principles…

The 'design' of the information and quality over quantity

Choice of colours – neutral but appealing. Imagery to break up text and bring information to life. Key details only. Participant involvement in design/images.

Whether the message may need to be adapted for different users – yes!

1. Staff – include high level of risk factors and associations with achievement to raise motivation

2. Parents – less on risk factors and more on how to help; avoid blame

3. Students – avoid most of risk factors and focus on benefits; recognise pride/success and move away from this being linked with *perfectionism*

The timing of dissemination

The dissemination of the guidance was timed in the middle of the academic year, so that students had settled into their year group and were beginning to prepare for examinations; this was intended to raise motivation to access the guidance.

Who may need to help with the dissemination?

Staff involved in study.

Action plan for the dissemination of information

The following table shows the action plan designed following the findings of Phase One and the beginning of Phase Two. This is based upon the three types of dissemination; the delivering and receiving of a message for awareness, understanding or action (Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning, 1997).

Table 34

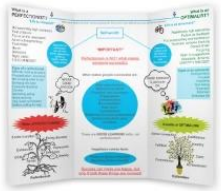
Action plan for the dissemination of guidance

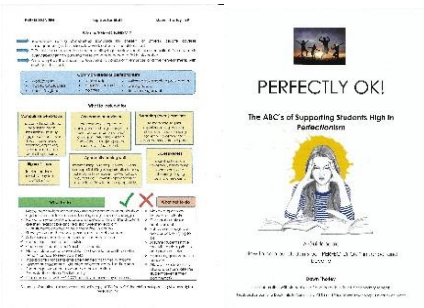
Purposes	**Target groups**	**Method**	**Vehicle**	**Timing**	**Responsibility of**	**Cost**	**Criteria for success**
Raise understanding of *perfectionism* Raise awareness of the potential risks of *perfectionism* Promote positive action to support the emotional wellbeing of students high in *perfectionism*	Students Staff Parents	Psycho-education Self-help and step-by-step how-to guides	INSET Leaflets Individual cards Poster Booklet	Spring term (pre-exams)	Researcher Students Staff Parents	Printing Time	Feedback in Phase Two and future study potential

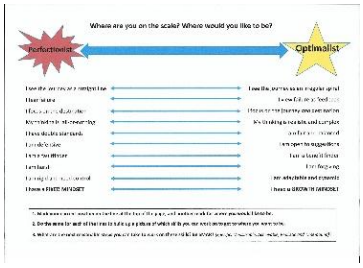
8.13 Appendix M: The guidance

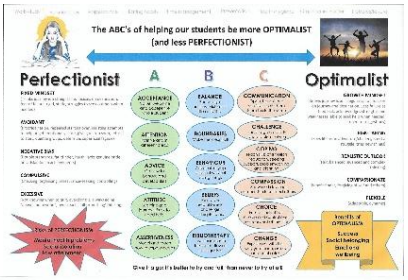
Each participant received the following (final) guidance according to their group:

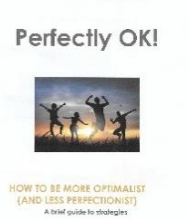
Student	**Parent**	**Staff (one copy per school)**
Individual pocket card	Information/tips leaflet	Powerpoint presentation
Information/tips leaflet	Powerpoint presentation	Guidance booklet/handbook
Powerpoint presentation	Pencil	Student/parent leaflets
Worksheet and pencil		Student cards, booklet, worksheets
Strategies booklet		**A3** staffroom poster
		Staff cribsheet
		Case studies (suicide)
		Memory stick with all above
		Plastic folder to store above











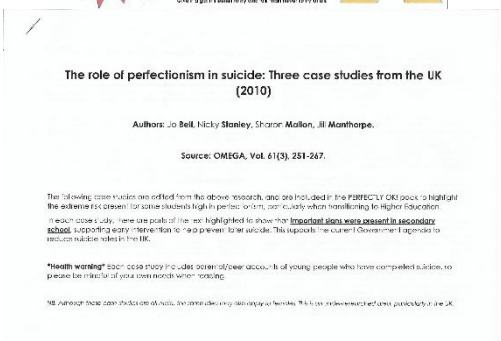


Figure 36. The guidance.

8.14 Appendix N: Evaluation e-mail

Dear (name)

I am pleased to let you know the guidance I have produced for schools and families is complete and ready to share with you for your feedback. Many thanks for your patience and I hope you are still keen to be involved in this final part of my research!

I have attached the guidance intended for (participant group) for you to have a look through. This includes (resources). The (other participant groups) in the study have received separate guidance.

I would be grateful if you could consider your opinions on the following:

- how **informative** the guidance is for (participant group), is there anything you would leave out or add in?
- the **design/style** of the guidance, again any changes you would make or things you particularly like?
- how easy to understand are the **explanations** given?
- how **effective** is this likely to be in your/your child's school for raising awareness of *perfectionism* and inspiring change, bearing in mind some of the challenges we discussed?
- do you feel your **voice** has been captured somewhat in the guidance, i.e. does it represent some of your ideas and/or clarify any misconceptions you might have had?
- your **overall** thoughts on the guidance, including anything that particularly stood out, and suggested changes or 'next steps'?

We have three options for sharing your thoughts:

1. You can simply write me an e-mail
2. We can speak on the phone
3. I can chat with you in person when I next visit school (date)

I will be in touch by (date) regarding your preference, if I don't hear from you before!

When I visit school I will bring with me hard copies of the guidance for you to keep, as promised at the beginning of the research. You will receive this whether we meet in person or not.

I look forward to hearing your feedback on the guidance and hope you feel able to be open and honest with your thoughts! Constructive criticism is very welcome, as are any positives.

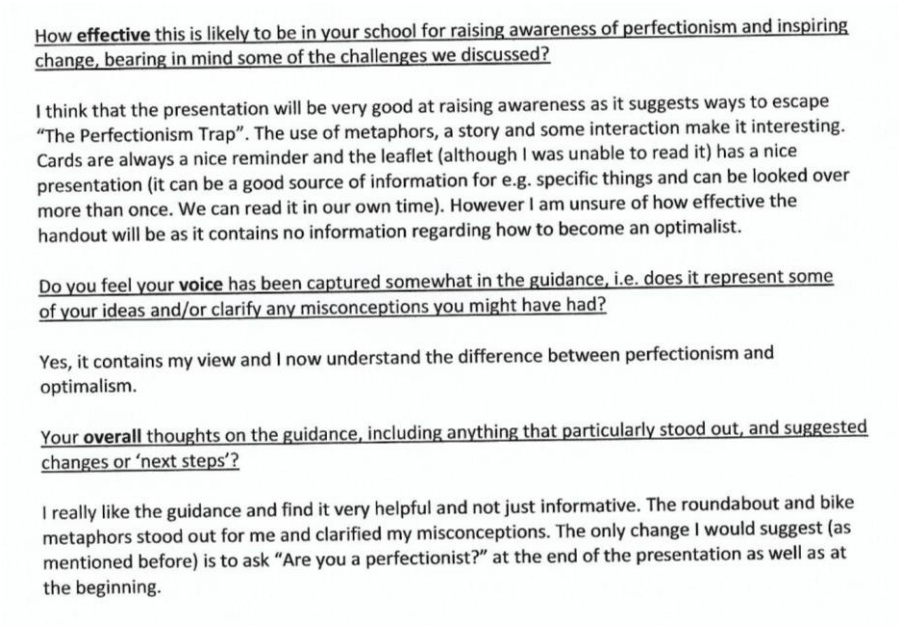
Best wishes and many thanks,

Dawn

8.15 Appendix O: Data analysis (Phase Two: evaluations)

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Sample e-mail excerpt (Sage^, Y10):



How **effective** this is likely to be in your school for raising awareness of perfectionism and inspiring change, bearing in mind some of the challenges we discussed?

I think that the presentation will be very good at raising awareness as it suggests ways to escape "The Perfectionism Trap". The use of metaphors, a story and some interaction make it interesting. Cards are always a nice reminder and the leaflet (although I was unable to read it) has a nice presentation (it can be a good source of information for e.g. specific things and can be looked over more than once. We can read it in our own time). However I am unsure of how effective the handout will be as it contains no information regarding how to become an optimalist.

Do you feel your **voice** has been captured somewhat in the guidance, i.e. does it represent some of your ideas and/or clarify any misconceptions you might have had?

Yes, it contains my view and I now understand the difference between perfectionism and optimalism.

Your **overall** thoughts on the guidance, including anything that particularly stood out, and suggested changes or 'next steps'?

I really like the guidance and find it very helpful and not just informative. The roundabout and bike metaphors stood out for me and clarified my misconceptions. The only change I would suggest (as mentioned before) is to ask "Are you a perfectionist?" at the end of the presentation as well as at the beginning.

Figure 37. Sample e-mail excerpt (Phase Two evaluations).

Table 35

Overall summary of the guidance

Role	Participant	Feedback
Student	Maddy^	It's good. I really like the handouts!
	Amy^	I like the multiple definitions of *perfectionism* as people can see whether they have some of or all of those traits, and they can begin to understand how to make sure they don't affect them negatively. I love the idea of a card to keep with you as it makes the idea of *perfectionism* more personal as oppose to something that seems a bit alien
	Sage^	I really like the guidance and find it very helpful and not just informative. The roundabout and bike metaphors stood out for me and clarified my

		misconceptions. Informative as well as explaining the term *perfectionism* (and its link to 'optimalism') superbly
	Harriet^	That actually works really well.
	Isabelle	I believe (the powerpoints and handouts) they show a good explanation of *perfectionism*.
	Emily	it's easy and fun to read
	Lizzie^	I thought the leaflet was interesting
	Charlotte	Overall, I think that the guidance is organised well and is extremely informative. I really like the fact that you have used multiple quotes and images to back up the ideas you are putting across.
	Nadia^	It's nice. When you first see the leaflet it's like, ok another…but if you read it, it says the right stuff. It's just everyone's kind of natural reaction to a leaflet.
	Jessica	I like the worksheet, seeing where you need to focus more and the little card, it's really handy to take about. I really like the pencil!
	Grace^	The leaflet and the card are really good. Really good points on, for example to be more 'optimalist'.
	Jack	I think it was quite balanced, not boring but enough information for the presentation to be good. It's all good.
	Matt	It's good and it should help people. It's nice.
	Brad	It's a nice little booklet! Well done! I like the 'optimalist' bit as an alternative!
	Cato	I like it.
	Charlie	I like the quote (front of leaflet). I'm going to write that down. I rather like this leaflet! It's really good. I like it!
	Harry	This is really good, especially the leaflet!
Parent	Joanne	The guidance/powerpoint is excellent (as a parent I can see many truths and facts that relate to how they feel).

	Emma^	Very informative and covering issues you would probably be unaware of. Stirring, thought-provoking stuff in a nutshell really!
	Jane^	Thankyou for the interesting parents' flyer and Powerpoint! The information and suggestions to do something about *perfectionist* behaviour are emphatically conveyed and so hopefully find acceptance.
	Victoria	The guidance/Powerpoint is good and proves very interesting reading. I think most parents will have something to identify with.
	Dave^	Thought it looked really good. Well done you
	Joel^	You have done a great work which I am sure will help many people; which is a real credit to you.
Staff	Julia	Good, yeah. It's perfect, it's exactly what I wanted! I like the Blob classroom bit and the thought bubbles, those were really good.
	Claire	I like it. It's good quality! Good quality leaflet. I like the ABC – the poster, that can go up in the staffroom. Teachers will like that, it's slick and you can see the strategies easily. Is that on a powerpoint? It would be good to have it on a powerpoint so you can zoom in on the different areas.
	Delta	I think the crib sheet is a great idea. The presentation looks fab, really nice and clear, both in terms of definitions and aesthetically too.
	Michelle	I think it works well as a document and is an interesting area of training.
	James	I think it's absolutely outstanding. It looks brilliant. You must be pleased with it as it looks absolutely great. It's really, really good. The poster is useful. I like it. The teacher's (parent) leaflet is good. Absolutely fantastic. It's very enlightening.
	Marie	It's great.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

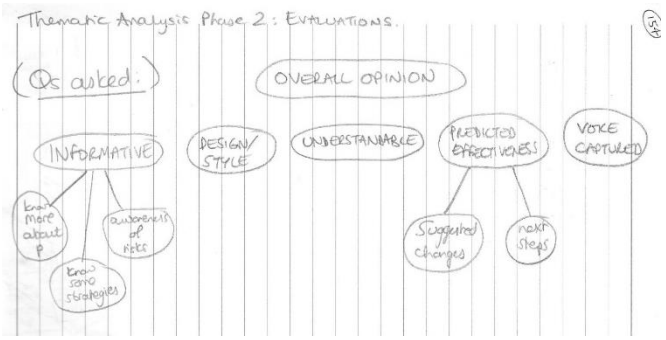


Figure 38. Generating initial codes (Phase Two evaluations).

Phase 3: Searching for themes

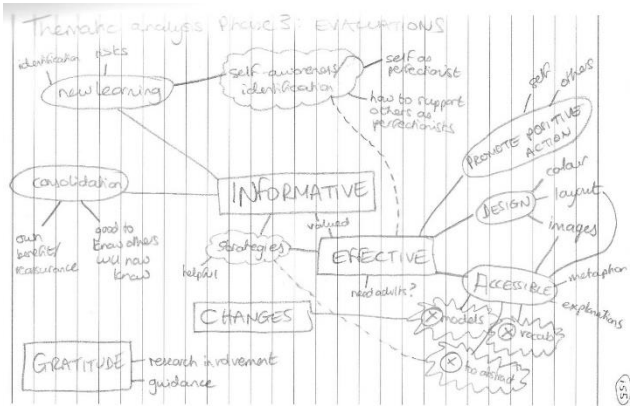


Figure 39. Searching for themes (Phase Two evaluations).

Phase 4: Reviewing the themes

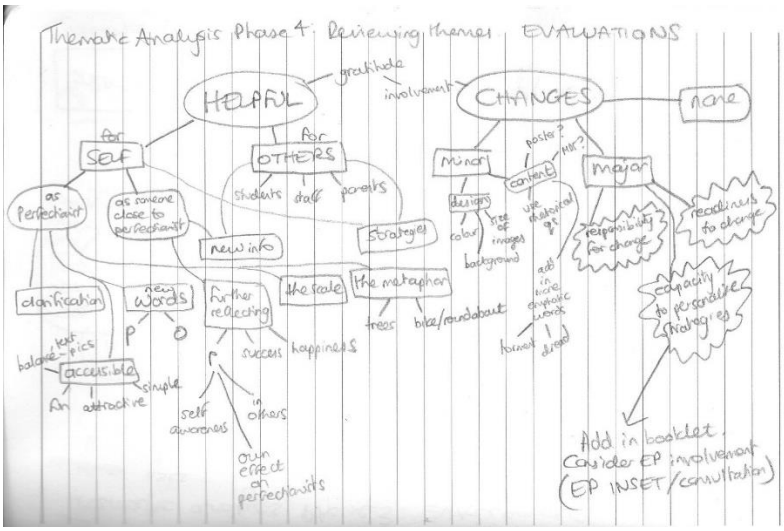


Figure 40. Reviewing the themes (Phase Two evaluations).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

The final themes identified are below, followed by a narrative account for each one:

a. New learning and consolidation

b. Self-awareness and identification with the guidance

c. Effectiveness of the guidance

d. Encouraging positive action

e. Gratitude

f. Value of the research

g. Changes

a. New learning and consolidation

Participants felt the guidance provided useful information, and many felt they themselves had learned more about *perfectionism* after reading the guidance, reflected in this student's comment:

> I didn't realise people would be restricting eating or over-exercising because of it (Brad, Y9).

Something which stood out was the provision of a word (*perfectionism*) to describe what students were experiencing, for example:

> It kind of categorises the things I do now into this one thing, now it's *perfectionism*, whereas before it was a bit this and that and other things whereas now it's altogether, there's a word for it. I noticed a lot of things on there were relevant to me (Jessica, Y10)
>
> It's good to have a word to describe it then you can tackle it. Until you've got a word you don't really know what's going on or why you find things so difficult. Knowing it's *perfectionism* helps you make sense of it (Cato, Y10)
>
> I think an assembly is good as it might make people realise that's why they're stressed. It could be helpful to have a word to describe it (Emily, Y10).

An insightful comment from Charlie (Y10) on the nature of 'labelling' was as follows:

> No one label will fit someone perfectly but everyone strives to have a label and to fit in with some crowd!

Participants who initially perceived *perfectionism* in positive terms perhaps learned the most from the guidance, for example:

> I learned a lot! I thought *perfectionism* was a good thing originally and now I think it's better to be an 'optimalist' (Matt, Y9).

Those who had a more negative or conflicted view on *perfectionism* also experienced a shift in perspective, for example:

> I definitely see *perfectionism* in a different light now as a result (Amy^, Y9)
>
> I particularly found the distinction between being conscientious and a *perfectionist* very helpful, as I think people will often refer to themselves as being a *perfectionist*, but not have the stress and anxiety associated with it (Michelle, T).

'Optimalist' was a new word for all participants:

> I didn't know the word 'optimalist', I knew optimal and optimism (Jack, Y9)
>
> I like the phrase 'optimalist', it's not one I'd heard before. It made me smile when I read it! I thought, that makes sense! (Marie, T)
>
> I must admit, I didn't really know about the concept of an 'Optimalist' but like it very much! (Jane^, P)
>
> I now understand the difference between *perfectionism* and 'optimalism' (Sage^, Y10).

The information made some participants reflect on their own constructs of success, for example:

> I still hold onto the idea that 'thriving to do your best' is a good thing – maybe it can be replaced by a more 'optimalist' approach in future (Jane^, P)
>
> I definitely know more now and also it tells you that it's ok to not be a *perfectionist* and there's a balance between being a *perfectionist* and an 'optimalist'. Especially the list of what makes

> you successful. I think some people do get confused with *perfectionists* being people who do well and actually it's other things that lead to that (Harry, Y10).

The guidance also prompted participants to think more broadly about the issue, for example:

> I suppose the technology world has changed significantly over the last decade…social networking and posting of pictures…also the next available best outfit on the market etc. Keeping up with those that are at the best restaurants…Holidays and new cars. Is this leading us to a different kind of pressure? (Joanne, P)
>
> It's how they use social media as well. It's how to be popular in their eyes, to be the best at everything! They want as many followers on their Instagram as possible but they don't know what makes a real friend. They put themselves up on a pedestal as that's the way to feel love, but they're isolated and lonely (Marie, T).

A number of participants felt the guidance confirmed what they knew about *perfectionism*, finding clarification or consolidation of their ideas, for example:

> When you see something written it sort of clarifies it. It reassures me I was thinking the right things (Nadia^, Y10)
>
> I knew some of it from books I've read, but this has justified it (Grace^, Y10)
>
> Until you'd said it last time at the start I don't think I'd really thought about it. When I started thinking about it I realised I knew more about it (Emily, Y10)
>
> In my conscious mind I know more about it. Subconsciously I knew most of it but it brings it to mind seeing it there written down in front of you (Charlie, Y10).

b. Self-awareness and identification with the guidance

Another theme to emerge was that of participants reflecting, unprompted, on their own identification with the guidance, either referring directly to themselves (highlighting increased self-awareness for some participants):

> That's a good bit, not asking for help, 'cause I don't like to ask for help. It's like when you have a problem and you type it into Google and you see other people have written about it, so you know you're not the only one (Cato, Y10)
>
> 90% of what's down on that paper is me, it explains me! I just feel like I'm going round in a circle. That roundabout is exactly it (Jessica, Y10)
>
> I like the meaning behind the pictures. The roundabout is exactly how it is, going round and round. I can see the stuff I thought was how I felt. My thinking is definitely all or nothing. My parents say that (Grace^, Y10)

> The procrastination thing is exactly right – I can do 30 minutes work in 8 days, or 8 days work in 30 minutes! I have a violent fear of failure (Charlie, Y10).

or referring to how they would implement the guidance to support students:

> I can definitely relate to this personally and feel the modern day pressures do have an effect on those students that do feel they have to achieve the best (Joanne, P)
>
> I can see as well how much my role as a teacher can influence student's perspective, in one sense you're supposed to give feedback but you have to think about the language you use. We have pupils who present as very anxious and it comes out as absenteeism around exam time and you have to think about what lies behind that is striving. We have an awful lot of students who go to see our counsellor. Perhaps if staff had more awareness of the anxiety that comes from *perfectionism* then teachers might be more able to offer help so the school counsellor doesn't get overwhelmed (James, T).

All participants felt the research had captured their voice and that they had been heard and understood, with the students feeling particularly 'heard' in both the leaflet and the presentation. The bipolar scale appeared to stand out in particular, suggesting a useful tool for schools/EPs to use, for example:

> I like the scale, it's really practical and you can see really easily where you are (Nadia^, Y10)
>
> You could use different colours on the scale for different times of the year! (Harriet^, Y9).

c. Effectiveness of the guidance

On the whole, the guidance was considered to be effective, summed up in the following student's comment:

> The use of metaphors, a story and some interaction make the presentation interesting. Cards are always a nice reminder and the leaflet has a nice presentation (it can be a good source of information for e.g. specific things and can be looked over more than once. We can read it in our own time). (Sage^, Y10).

Sub-themes which emerged within the area of effectiveness will now be explored.

Information

All participants found the guidance informative. There was a strong sense among the self-identifying *perfectionist* students that others don't know what *perfectionism* means, strengthening support for the critical emancipatory approach of the study. These students found the guidance for others pleasing, for example:

> I don't think people know what it means. I think it's a good basis to help people know what it means (Nadia^, Y10)
>
> I felt on my own because not a lot of people understood it. Teachers and parents don't always get it. You feel like the only one in the boat. I think your research could really help me (Jessica, Y10)
>
> Teachers and parents don't always get it, this explains it (Grace^, Y10)
>
> I like how you talk about both sides of *perfectionism* and go over the mental health side effects of it (this is something that many people forget to cover, or do not cover it with enough detail) (Isabelle, Y10)
>
> It's good you've put the negative things there because a lot of people see *perfectionist* as a really good thing. The 'important' bit (what makes someone successful) you've put there is the key thing, that's it exactly! (Charlie, Y10).

This was reflected in comments by the staff and parents, for example:

> I found the presentation very informative, and felt it helped to clarify things well (Michelle, T)
>
> I think the crib sheet is a great idea – I found it really useful (Delta, T)
>
> I will certainly observe my daughter with new insights and try to carefully help
>
> her on her way into adulthood (Jane^, P).

Design

The design of the guidance was well-received by all participants, as reflected in the following comments from students:

> It's not too busy, and not too childish for our age group (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> It looks like something you'd want to pick up and read. Doesn't look, not sure what but sometimes leaflets can be over cramped. The leaflet is definitely fun (Emily, Y10)
>
> It's not childish but it's not set out as an essay (Jack, Y9)
>
> I like how it's set out. That's a nice set out (ABCs). That is a good image (girl holding head)! (Brad, Y9)

staff:

> the presentation looks fab, really nice and clear both in terms of definitions and aesthetically too! (Delta, T)

and parents:

> The Powerpoint is great, lots of bright colour and pictures keep it interesting (Victoria, P)
>
> The parent leaflet is very colourful. Visually, I like the tree comparison especially the “acorn” tree giving a subtle but strong positive (Emma^, P).

A number of participants reflected on the interpretation of the colours used:

> I like the colour scheme. It’s good. I like the blue – it’s a cool and calm colour. It pairs up with knowledge and stuff as well (Harriet^, Y9)
>
> I like the colours. The green suggesting how you should be and the red the opposite really works (Grace^, Y10)
>
> I like the neutral colours, that’s good. People won’t associate it with football teams or something like that. (Charlie, Y10)
>
> It’s bright as well so it appeals you to the bits that are important (Harry, Y10).

Accessibility

Participants felt the information was accessible, for example:

> It looks like it’d sum it up and it’s easy and fun to read it. No one would read it if it was loads of writing (Emily, Y10)
>
> It hasn’t got any waffle in it, it’s right to the point (Harriet^, Y9)
>
> If you look at it it’s not long paragraphs, it’s just one words and easy to understand, no gobbledy-gook! (Matt, Y9)
>
> There’s lots of information, but not too much. It’s a really nice format, small and easy to access (Harry, Y10)
>
> It’s nice not having lots of writing. I don’t like reading a bit chunk of writing. You’ve set out the key things to do (Grace^, Y10).

The layout of the guidance also helped make it more accessible:

> I like the overall design. It’s useful. You can easily find a certain section and go straight to it (Jessica, Y10)

> It is very clearly set out, I really like the style of the guidance (Sage^, Y10)
>
> I like how things are all in boxes; that makes it easier to read (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> I really like the design because it isn't overly fancy or basic, but it still gets the message across in a clear and structured manner. I particularly love the leaflet design and layout (Charlotte, Y10).

The images were particularly well-received to support the text, for example:

> The explanations are worded in a way that is easy to understand, the roundabout and bike metaphor is a really good aid. The metaphor made the distinction between *perfectionism* and 'optimalism' clear for me (Sage^, Y10)
>
> There's a nice balance of diagrams; that makes it user-friendly. I found it quite accessible to read. It helps that you haven't got loads and loads of text and a diagram at the end. There's enough to draw you in, the images and text boxes really draw you in, so you've accessed it and you're into it before you get onto the denser bit (Marie, T)
>
> All the different ideas and images and pictures make it more user-friendly for you to understand (Matt, Y9).

The accessibility of the guidance was challenged by the use of more complex words, for example:

> I understood it all, maybe other people might not necessarily, maybe words like nuanced, conscientious, procrastination. I know what they mean but some might not (Brad, Y9)
>
> What does that say – conscientious? I know it once I read it (Harriet^, Y9).

And a couple of the staff found the discrepancies model slightly more challenging to understand at first glance, suggesting a need to amend:

> I wasn't clear on the model which students are of most concern bit, I couldn't really understand it just from the picture (Julia, T)
>
> One part of the Powerpoint was hard to understand, the model bit. If I don't immediately get something I will tend to move on (James, T).

But on the whole, the accessibility of the pack was valued by staff, for example:

> the pack is easy to follow, you don't often get that (Julia, T).

One staff member (Claire) suggested that less emotionally literate staff may struggle to use the information and may require the guidance to be broken down further still; this will be discussed under 'Changes'.

Parents all found the guidance accessible, with a minor issue highlighted by one:

> the explanations are easy to understand, but I would say that slide 9 (the "table") is a little difficult to read as a table (Victoria, P).

There was slight confusion amongst a couple of participants about the use of the word 'optimalist', for example:

> I didn't know what 'optimalist' was, I wondered if it's something like optimism. Once I worked it out I understood what it meant and it was fine. Maybe just say somewhere "optimalism means this" (Nadia^, Y10).

However following discussion, it was clear these participants hadn't yet read the notes within the presentation and after doing so, felt they understood much better what the word meant and why it was being used.

> There were a few bits I didn't understand, like this word 'optimalist', I asked colleagues and looked it up on Google. I think a bit more description is needed of what it is before going on to talk more – I get it now totally, after reading the notes! (Julia, T).

Purpose

Awareness-raising

Many participants reflected that a key part of the guidance was raising awareness of the risks associated with *perfectionism*, for example

> I knew the stress and anxiety bit. I think it would be helpful for people to know so they could think it's not always good to be a *perfectionist* and it could lead to stuff like depression (Harry, Y10)
>
> The slightly negative bits in the leaflet about *perfectionism* are good, so you know everything before you develop a view on it and it's not all one-sided (Charlie, Y10)
>
> Whilst we all feel anxiety surrounding deadlines and workload, more often than not, this can be rationalised, but with some of our students it is this lack of rationalisation which compounds things – I think it is useful for staff to be aware of this when thinking of our students, and this comes across in your work (Michelle, T)
>
> I think society sees *perfectionism* as the best thing to be. I think there is enough information here to think a lot more deeply about it. There's information about the risks without there being a terrible scare story, you don't want to be alarmist. There's enough to then go off and read more if you want to. There's a nice balance (Marie, T)
>
> Making other staff aware is the big thing so there's school-based support (Julia, T).

There was also a sense that the information would be helpful for those students who were unaware of their own *perfectionism*:

> It someone was a *perfectionist* and didn't know they could look at the behaviours and think about if it applies to them. Also even if they're an 'optimalist' they could look at what to avoid so they don't become *perfectionists* (Cato, Y10).

Many participants stated that they knew some of these risks already, but it would be helpful for informing others, for example:

> I was already aware but I know most people aren't (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> I already knew these. The boxes are good, it's put it into words, I knew I should be preventing it but when you see it on the page it makes sense (Grace^, Y10).

This is interesting because few participants identified in depth the risks associated with *perfectionism* in the first phase of the research. However, when presented with the risks in writing, it appears they felt more familiar with these, or perhaps wanted to show that they knew this information already. One student who identified as a 'former *perfectionist'* (Brad, Y9) suggested that the risks be made even more obvious in the guidance.

Many participants discussed how their own awareness of the risks had grown following the guidance, for example:

> I didn't know it could lead to eating disorders. I bet that's image *perfectionism* is it? It's good you put that there's not just one type of *perfectionism*, there's grades yeah but there's also appearance (Cato, Y10)
>
> I wasn't aware that *perfectionism* can be limited to one or a few aspects of your life and still have quite an impact (Jane^, P)
>
> The parent leaflet is thought provoking (had never given eating disorders/self-harm/depression a thought…) (Emma^, P)
>
> I never fully appreciated the extent to which it can cause mental illness and even suicide. We almost accept that *perfectionism* is a good thing in society, when actually it's not. Staff would definitely be surprised with the link (James, T).

Strategies for support

Participants also discussed the strategies within the guidance. There was a strong sense that the strategies were useful, both for others:

> It could definitely help people (Lizzie^, Y10)
>
> The pyramid looks to be quite useful, if someone realised they were *perfectionist* they could use that (Cato, Y10)
>
> I definitely think you've got all the different aspects of strategies. You've definitely got the key aspects. Definitely! (Harry, Y10)
>
> I think one of the issues we have as teachers is that we project our own worries onto our students (we have targets that we need to meet, and so put this pressure onto the students) but it would be helpful for us all to remember the bigger picture and rather than to tell students they must do more, reflect on what will happen if they don't meet the high standards they (or we) set for them. I think that came across well in the strategies part of the presentation too, as well as the document – I know as a school we are trying to promote resilience amongst our learners and these questions and thinking go some way towards this. It is important we take the time to have these conversations with our students – be it in our capacity as classroom teachers or from a tutor/pastoral role. The paper documents are also helpful – clear and concise, with guided information. I am sure it will be of use to many staff, but I especially think many staff will get something from the presentation side of things too (Michelle, T).

And for the participants themselves:

> I would definitely keep a card with me along with lots of others (Amy^, Y9)
>
> The "ABCs of becoming more of an 'optimalist'" really stood out to me. I would find those tips useful myself, so I assume others would too (Charlotte, Y10)
>
> I think your research could really help me (Jessica, Y10)
>
> I'm more clear after seeing the strategies on the Powerpoint (Julia, T)
>
> I like the activities (Marie, T)
>
> I love the quote on slide 11! And also slide 29 *Perfectionist* to 'optimalist' is great – food for thought (Victoria, P).

However there was also a sense that some participants would prefer even more concrete guidance to help them know exactly what to do. This is discussed in 'Changes'.

d. Encouraging positive action

Another theme which arose was in the language of proposed action, particularly amongst the staff, for example:

> I wonder if it could be a whole school staff thing? It would be interesting for people to hear about it. It links in really well with the mental health bits we've been doing. I can definitely see some of our pupils who have these traits and want to adapt the activities to suit them, I like these activities. I think in PSHE it'd be nice to put them into a lesson. I'd like to start to talk to parents about it, I could share some of this with them (Marie, T)
>
> We are starting a wellbeing curriculum where we are teaching the girls to be mindful and in the moment. More discipline and guidance is needed, they don't know how to do things so need it really structuring for them to learn. The CBT model fits well into our wellbeing curriculum (Claire, T)
>
> Is the presentation just going to be for staff? Something like this could be really powerful if it was incorporated into PSHE or development days for students too…*Perfectionism* could easily be incorporated into the learning styles area and this might then help students identify if they themselves are a *perfectionist* and then maybe start learning various coping mechanisms/ways of working etc. (Delta, T).

Some students and parents reflected upon the limitations of their guidance for instigating real change:

> The effectiveness will probably vary from student to student, but I think that lots will find it beneficial. It will definitely raise awareness, but whether people will act upon it is a different matter. Not everyone will be interested, but that is the same in any situation, and as long as you try to keep the presentation entertaining and engaging, there shouldn't be any major issues (Charlotte, Y10)
>
> It would definitely at least start at first glance make them think that's what I can work on but I don't think reading something will solve it (Emily, Y10)
>
> It could start something but it'd take more help from teachers to make more effect for a change (Jack, Y9)
>
> I think even though the leaflet is really good I think some students might miss the point of it – they might think "I'm not a *perfectionist*, this isn't me". There could be an activity that goes with it, like what you did with me, you got me to draw a shape; that could go with it to help them see (Harry, Y10)
>
> I would like to see a bit more on how schools can support children more – are there certain activities that could help, raising awareness within the school environment, identifying children who are *perfectionists*? (Emma^, P)
>
> I do think that parents will be able to identify if they have children that are *perfectionists* but whether they are willing to do anything about it is another matter…(Victoria, P).

All these participants highlighted the need for staff support too, and were reassured by discussion of the guidance provided for staff.

e. Gratitude

A powerful and pleasing theme to emerge in the feedback was that of gratitude, both for involvement in the research, for example:

> I was happy to help and delighted that you gave me the chance to take part in your research (Emily, Y10)
>
> I really enjoyed it! It was interesting (Brad, Y9)
>
> I'm glad I was able to help you with the creation of this guidance (Charlotte, Y10)

and the provision of guidance for those students identifying as high in *perfectionism*:

> I'd like to say thank you for the guidance and strategies as I really feel they will help me a lot. Thank you again (Amy^, Y9)
>
> Thank you so much for this. Thank you! I think your research could really help me. Thank you for letting me be a part of your program and supporting what I find a daily struggle (Jessica, Y10)
>
> The "ABC's of becoming more of an 'optimalist'" really stood out to me. I would find those tips useful myself, so I assume others would too (Charlotte, Y10).

The interview process alone appeared to have provided enough of an 'intervention' for some participants:

> I'd just like to say thank you. You've done a really good job. You've definitely opened my mind. Last year I was definitely closer to the *perfectionist* side but now I know what I think isn't necessarily a bad thing and you don't have to be one or the other. Charlie and I were talking about it just this morning and he was saying the same, just the research, the interview bit has changed the way we think about it so thanks so much! (Harry, Y10)
>
> Thank you for giving us the opportunity to help with your research, I am only too happy to help further as I have already gained personally from the experience so far (Emma^, P).

f. Value of the research

Some participants explicitly commented on the value of the research area, for example:

> Glad we have been of some help toward your *Perfectionism* research. Trust your work will get some recognition and be of help to many budding *perfectionists*! (Joel^, P)
>
> I found it very interesting and enlightening. I wish your information pack was around when I was at school! What you have produced is absolutely fabulous and I'm confident there is a need for greater awareness about the issue (James, T)
>
> I think you can give it out to all people not just people who you think have it. Cos if it makes one person think that could be me then that's good (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> I think it would be good to have it in a PSHE lesson, for everybody (Harriet^, Y9).

Further work

All staff said they would be interested to stay in touch and be involved in any further work in the area, with a specific invite from Claire to help her launch the school's growth mindset curriculum by sharing the current research and speaking with the STORM/wellbeing team to advise them on the interventions provided by their mental health support unit.

g. Changes

No changes

The majority of participants could identify no changes they would make to the guidance, for example:

> No changes, I think it's all good (Jack, Y9).

Minor changes

Some participants indicated minor changes they would make to the guidance, relating to design (colour, size, layout) or content (minor additions or alterations). These can be seen in Table 36.

Table 36

Suggested changes to the guidance

Change suggested		Participant
Design	**Content**	
Colour underline for table headings in presentation		Joanne (P)
Enlarge image on leaflet cover, add a coloured border and enlarge text		Emma^ (P)
Pastel-coloured background on leaflet, make scale bolder and images bigger, writing more colourful on front		Harriet^ (Y9)
Enlarge image and text on leaflet. Reconsider use of red spiky shape on scale worksheet		Charlie (Y10)
Make the 'ABC' element stand out more on leaflet		Matt (Y9)
Use realistic pictures, like the girl one, for the bike and roundabout so they are less cartoony	Use rhetorical questions in the assembly like "did you know it can cause restrictive eating?"	Brad (Y9)
Use the same background on each slide (although sometimes this acts as a nice contrast). Avoid black and red in the leaflet as it may be hard to read.	Add in the question "are you a *perfectionist*?" to the end of the presentation to see if students' views have changed	Sage^ (Y10)
	Include more information on *perfectionism* related to social media	Victoria (P)

	Add in the words 'torment' and 'dread'. Remove 'there is no such thing as perfect' and the word 'nuanced'.	Joel^ (P)
	Poster of the strategies for staffrooms	Delta (T)
	Poster onto Powerpoint, further emphasis on suicide link	Claire (T)
	Parent leaflet for teachers too	James (T)
	Mention the availability of a strategies booklet on the leaflet for people to go to for more information if desired. Show some examples of people with *perfectionism* and their thought bubbles	Cato (Y10)
	Add in school nurse and social workers to the external professionals part of the guidance. EP and CAMHS time very limited so this part of the guidance was not applicable for us.	Julia (T)
	Revision guidance specifically	Jessica (Y10) Grace^ (Y10)

Possible barriers and more significant issues

Reflection on the feedback highlighted a number of more problematic issues:

Responsibility for change

Although the majority of participants appeared empowered by their guidance, it was noted that one teacher (James) and one student (Brad, Y9) felt the presentation

would be better received if someone external came in to present it, rather than teachers within school. Specifically, Brad commented:

> I'd prefer someone from outside coming into do it, they know what they're talking about, teachers can just dig anything off the Internet and might just be making it all up!

Readiness to change

There is a consideration of self-awareness, highlighted by two students:

> I don't think people would be able to self-diagnose with *perfectionism*. But family members or friends can say that looks like you. So for example I have a friend who I think is *perfectionist* but she doesn't realise it. I think people would need to be ready to hear it (Maddy^, Y9)

> You're asking them to define themselves (scale worksheet), but people who want to do it have trouble doing it and want people to do it for them. Or they might not even be able to see it for themselves at all yet. They perhaps wouldn't even be able to do it with direct adult support; the person who knows you best is you, but people have masks and even masks to themselves so they don't even know who they are! (Charlie, Y10).

This is where a more systemic approach could be beneficial, using the models provided in the staff guidance. Where students feel ready to address the issue, there is a further consideration of the capacity to self-rate accurately. For example, Maddy^ (Y9) suggested:

> It's difficult to put yourself on a scale…you feel bad rating yourself high…as though you're doing it for attention. Maybe take away the headings of *perfectionist* and 'optimalist' so the student doesn't know what they're scoring, the adult does and they can score it for them. Mix up the scales too so you don't just score it how you think it should be scored.

There is also the issue, particularly with SPP, that a student high in *perfectionism* will not get to the stage of seeking help, out of embarrassment:

> The assembly will probably get people thinking but they probably wouldn't go up to get a leaflet. They'd be too embarrassed. It'd be better if they were all given out in registers so more people would actually look at them (Matt, Y9).

Capacity to personalise strategies

This is a significant area of concern, addressed by at least one member of each participant group and indicating a priority area for immediate action within the research design. For example, a parent commented:

> I would like to see a bit more on how parents can support children more – are there certain activities that could help, handy hints for parents, are there any self-help groups in the local area? What peers can do to help, what are "healthy coping skills?" (on your ABC page) etc. (Emma^, P).

This parent also demonstrated a mild defensiveness relating to one aspect of the guidance, stating:

> Sadly there must be many parents who act as described on p24 of your presentation (parental expectations and parental criticisms) but equally there must be many who don't (myself included I have to say!)

On reflection, more emphasis could be put in the parent guidance on the various functions of *perfectionism* (as highlighted in the staff guidance) as any perception of blame, although unintended, may present a major barrier to parents accessing and implementing the guidance. Staff members noted:

> It's good if you're emotionally literate but it might need breaking down further for other staff, for example how to judge which intervention to use, you and I might know, but staff might need pointers or questions to guide them. Perhaps make it even clearer and more transparent for teachers, what exact techniques are we talking about. (Claire, T)

> My response as a teacher if I'm being brutally honest, I would prefer somebody like yourself to come in and deliver CPD on it. With the workload that I have, would I have the time to read through the booklet, that's why I think the poster's great to put up in staffroom. I don't think teachers would have time to look through it if I'm brutally honest (James, T).

And significantly, a number of students commented:

> I am unsure how effective the handout will be as it contains no information regarding how to become an 'optimalist' (Sage^, Y10)

> I think it needs more of that bit how do you get those things, strive for those (Harriet^, Y9)

> I think if you could maybe make it clear, maybe give an example of each (Harry, Y10)

> what to do is there, it's more the how (Nadia^, Y10)

> I think the information is really useful and relevant. But I'm not sure what exactly to do, like it's up to me to put it into practice but I would feel better having more help to know what exactly, like being told what to do. I'm not sure about these, "how to become more 'optimalist'". Not sure where to start, how to go about it. Maybe like some actual ways you can do that, maybe a booklet? (Jessica, Y10).

Following these discussions, a short booklet was produced with more concrete strategies for supporting the emotional wellbeing of students high in *perfectionism*. This was available for those who wanted more information following the leaflet. This was then circulated to participants and was very well-received:

> The booklet is brilliant! (Harry, Y10)
>
> The leaflet's a start, it's kind of like the diagnosis and the booklet is like how can I improve my situation (Cato, Y10)
>
> Having the strategies in a separate booklet is a good idea. You get extra information without being swamped. You can read the leaflet and get more information if needed. The leaflet gives the initial…then follow up with the booklet then talk to someone (Brad, Y9).

Three students highlighted the importance of the booklet being optional:

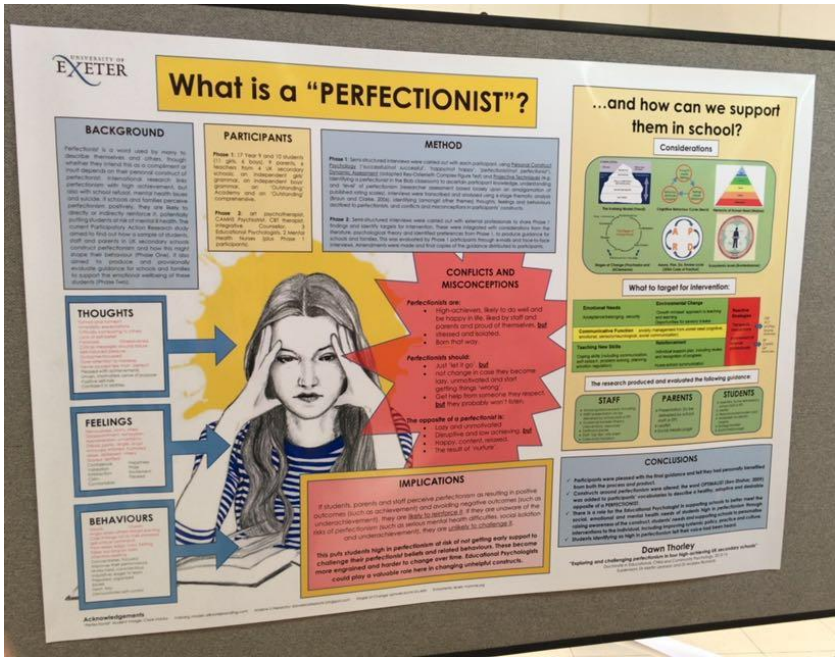
> Saying you have to do this to get better, giving you instructions, people might not like, rather than saying 'you could' I think is better. It would be good to have a booklet of concrete strategies 'cause some people like being told what to do. I would like that please. (Maddy^, Y9)
>
> I feel like you've set out the key things to do in the leaflet and in some ways I like it, I can make it more suitable for me and see how I want to do the different ABCs to suit me, but at the same time I also prefer being told what to do. I would like a booklet too (Grace^, Y10)
>
> The leaflet could say if you want to learn more look at the booklet, so it's not sensory overload! (Cato, Y10).

Additions to the staff guidance following discussion included an A3 poster (Delta, T) and case study research article elucidating further the link between *perfectionism* and suicide (Claire, T).

8.16 Appendix P: Postgraduate Research Showcase Poster

For more details, please see:

www.exeter.ac.uk/research/events/postgraduateresearchshowcase2016/



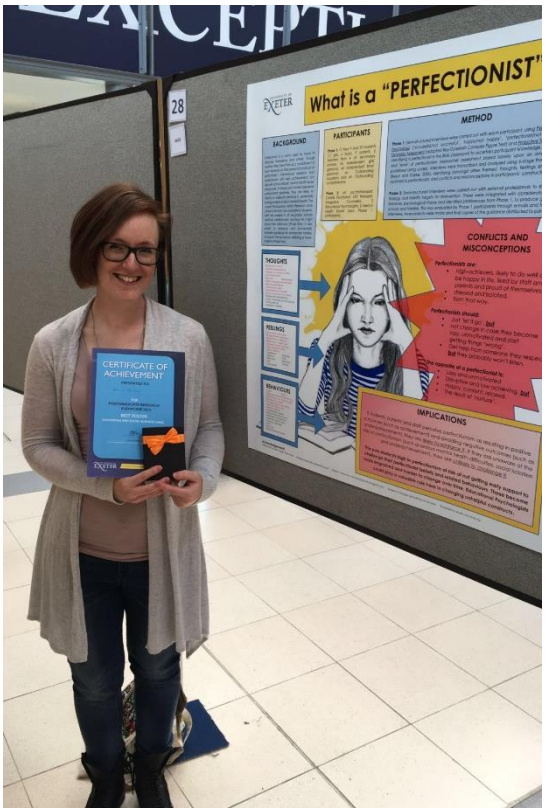


Figure 41. Postgraduate Research Showcase Poster.

8.17 Appendix Q: Cognitive errors

Definitions of cognitive distortions (from www.psychcentral.com/lib/15-common-cognitive-distortions/):

Filtering	Magnify the negative details and filter out positive aspects
Black and white thinking	No middle ground
Overgeneralisation	Come to general conclusion based on single piece of evidence
Jumping to conclusions	Assuming we know what the outcome was/will be
Catastrophising	Expecting the worst, no matter what
Personalisation	Taking everything personally and comparing self to others
Control fallacies	We are victims of fate OR responsible for everything
Fallacy of fairness	Resent that others don't share our view of fairness; refuse to believe life isn't fair
Blaming	Hold others responsible for our pain OR blame ourselves for every problem
Shoulds	Our ironclad rules which result in guilt, anger, frustration, resentment
Emotional reasoning	Assuming our feelings are true reflections of how things are
Fallacy of change	Expecting people will change to suit us
Global labelling	Extreme form of generalising; taking one or two qualities and using them as a negative global judgement of self or another
Always being right	Continually trying to prove self right, no matter the cost
Heaven's reward fallacy	Expect reward for sacrifice, bitter when it doesn't come.